

JEDI SURVIVOR REVIEWED



AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

SINCE 1996

SCI-FI NOIR

SHADOWS OF DOUBT

INFINITE DEUS EX-LIKE DETECTIVE SIM



DEAD ISLAND 2

BLOODY ZOMBIE SURVIVAL SIM
RATED

WARHAMMER
AGE OF SIGMAR

REALMS OF RUIN

CONQUER THE WORLD WITH
UNSTOPPABLE WARRIORS IN THE MOST
EPIC FANTASY RTS OF ALL TIME



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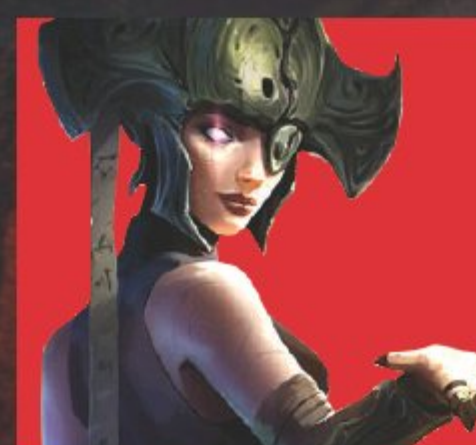
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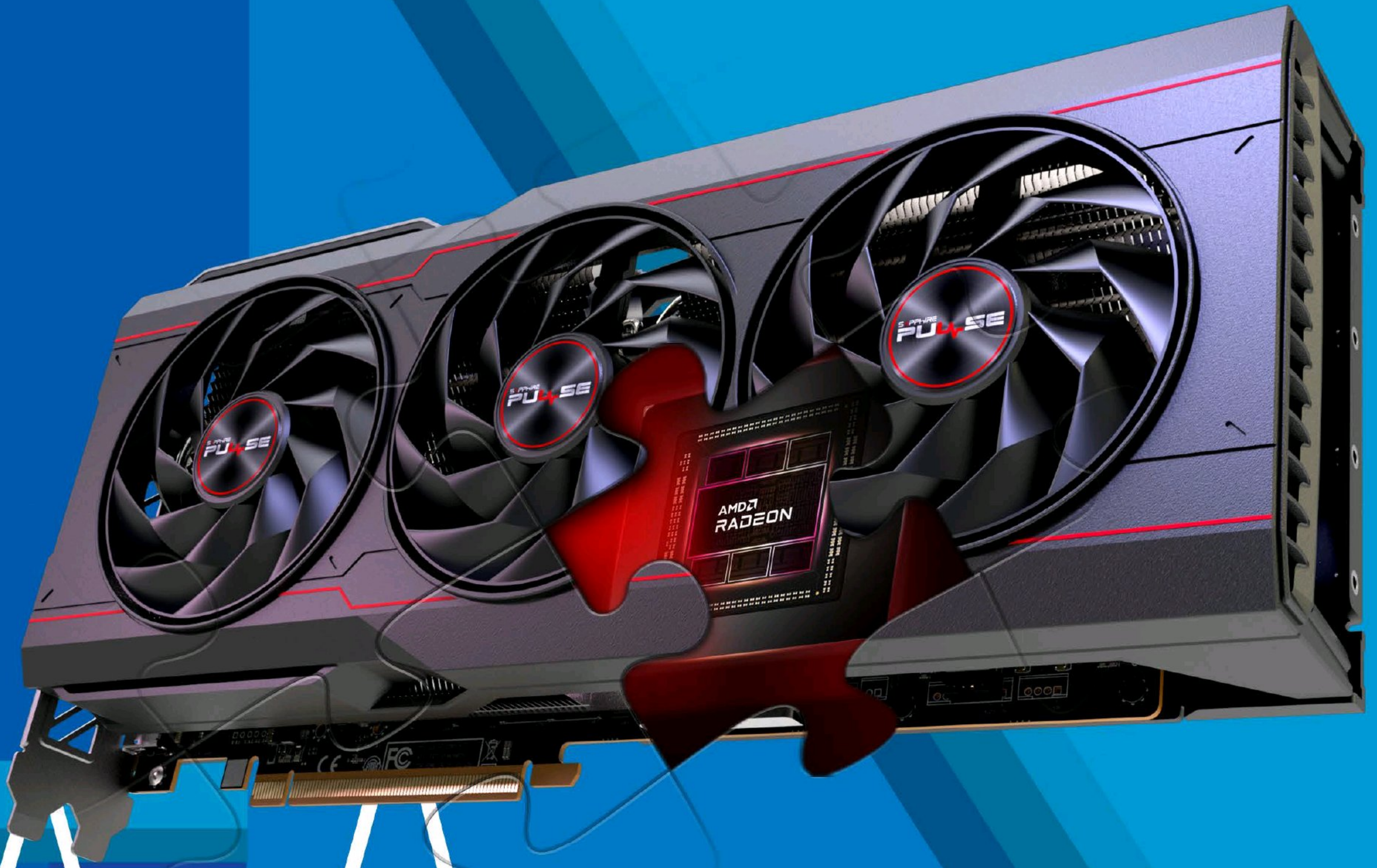


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“THE RTS GENRE REALLY HELPED DEFINE PC GAMING”



Commanded the Glorious PC Gaming Master Race army to crush heretical console gamer hordes.

BEN MANSILL
EDITOR

ben.mansill@futurenet.com

Isn't it great that the RTS genre is properly back on PC? Gaming on PC in the '90s, I was consistently blown away by the RTS genre, which with games like *Command & Conquer*, *StarCraft*, and *Age of Empires* among many more, really helped define PC gaming. So when the RTS fell out of fashion in the late 2000s, PC gaming arguably lost a piece of its soul.

So the fact that the RTS genre is back and, in *Warhammer Age of Sigmar: Realms of Ruin*, is bigger and more epic than ever before, is truly brilliant news for PC gamers the world over.

The PC PowerPlay team



ROBIN VALENTINE

This month
Had his soul magically reformed by the will of the God King Sigmar. Is now immortal, which is nice.



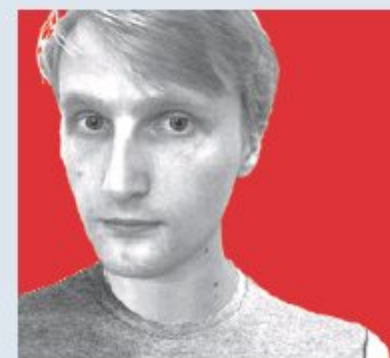
FRASER BROWN

This month
Recklessly charged into battle, '80s-style, bare-chested and with a Cuban cigar in his mouth.



JORGE JIMINEZ

This month
Tried really, really hard to slay a princess locked in a dingy basement. You heard!



JOSH WOLENS

This month
Wrongfully accused procedurally generated humans of committing terrible crimes.

Contents

#298
WINTER 2023



Monitor

06 THE TOP STORY

The ultimate RPG roundtable

08 THE SPY

New gaming rumours investigated

10 SPECIAL REPORT

Why building your own PC is key

12 SECRET LEVEL

How to be a professional level designer

14 INCOMING

The hottest games to get excited for

Previews

18 Shadows of Doubt

24 Hyperviolent

26 Jagged Alliance 3

30 Humanity

32 WrestleQuest

33 Kriegsfront Tactics

33 Slay the Princess

Features

34 Warhammer Age of Sigmar: Realms of Ruin

40 The complete history of Star Wars PC games

48 PC gaming's most controversial games ever



34



18 SHADOWS OF DOUBT PREVIEW

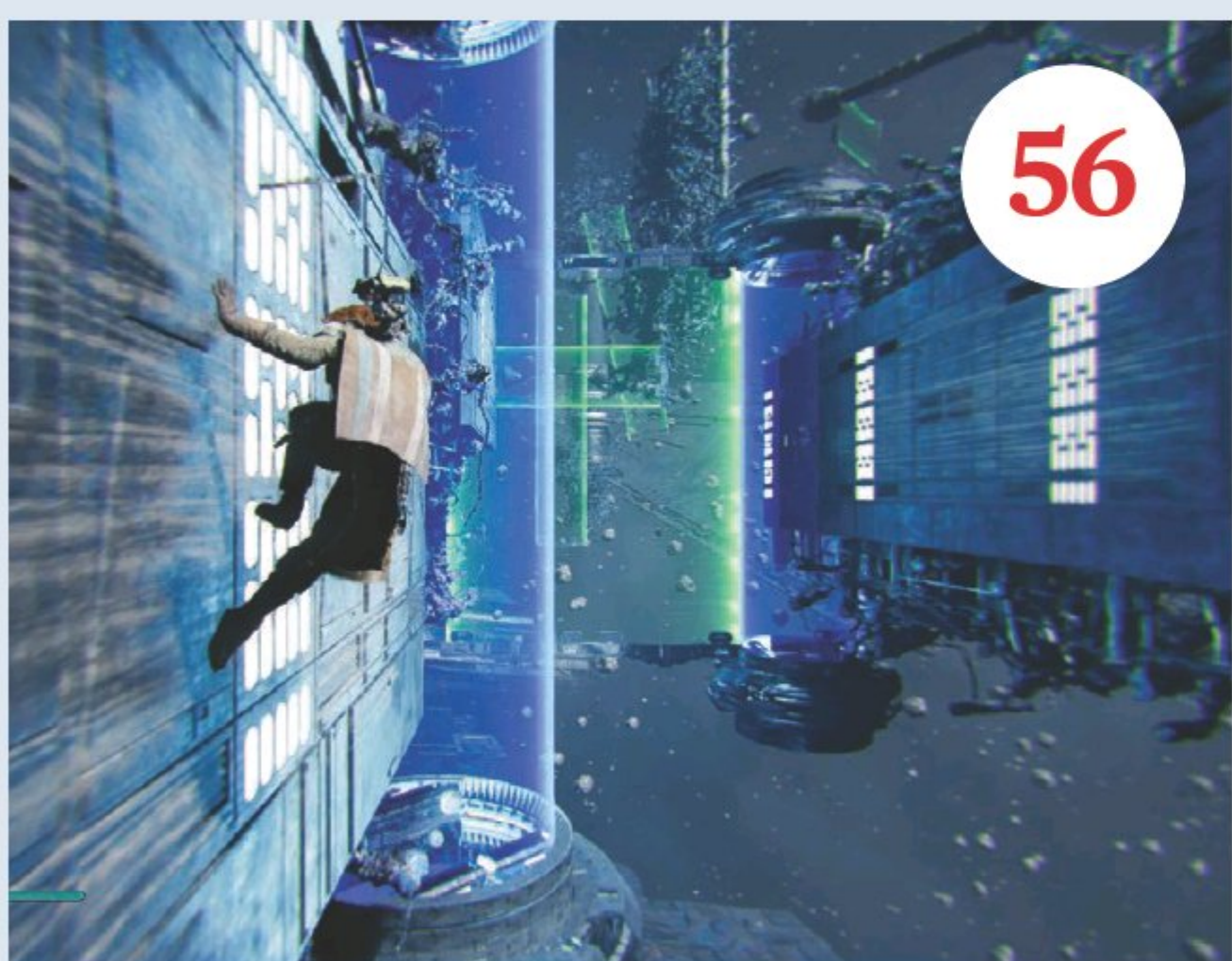
Joshua Wolens plays the exciting new procedurally generated city sandbox stealth detect-em-up.

34 WARHAMMER REALMS OF RUIN

Robin Valentine grabs his sword and wades into the epic new RTS in the Age of Sigmar universe.

40 STAR WARS PC GAMES BIBLE

Rick Lane takes a comprehensive tour through the best, worst and oddest Star Wars games on PC.



48 CONTROVERSIAL PC GAMES

From *Doom* to *Cyberpunk 2077*, these PC games raised serious levels of controversy on release.

56 STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

Cal Kestis, Jedi, returns with new abilities, powers and lightsabers. Morgan Park delivers our verdict.

86 NEW GAMING LAPTOPS RATED

The PC PowerPlay hardware lab tests six of the most powerful new gaming laptops on the market.

Reviews

56 *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor*

60 *Terra Nil*

62 *The Last of Us: Part 1*

66 *Ravenbound*

70 *Minecraft Legends*

72 *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened*

76 *Dead Island 2*

80 *Age of Wonders 4*

FREE GAMES

84 *The Murder of Sonic the Hedgehog*

84 *Uncharted Wanders*

85 *Drift*

Hardware

86 **GAMING LAPTOP GROUP TEST**

Extra Life

92 **NOW PLAYING**

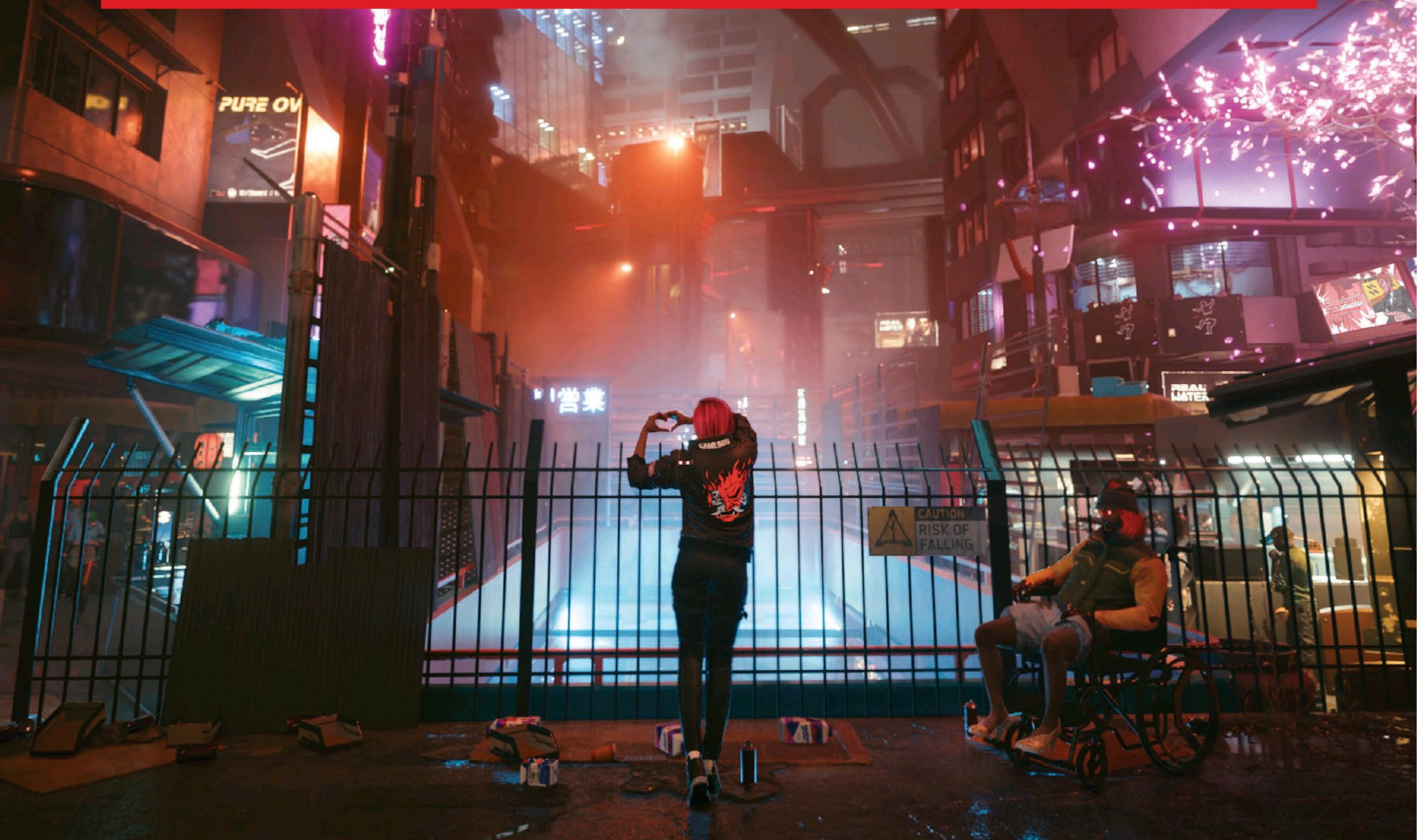
Baldur's Gate III, *Mini Motorways*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Hardwar*

96 **HOW TO**

Become a pro at playing *Jedi Survivor*

MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



CRACKING THE CODE

The designers of some of the **BIGGEST RPGs** think more complex tech is making things harder

During a designer roundtable, *Cyberpunk 2077* quest director Pawel Sasko and other RPG veterans discussed the “staggering” complexity of triple-A games. The article titled ‘The cinematic BioWare-style RPG is dead, it just doesn’t know it yet’ caused “a commotion” at CD Projekt Red, said Sasko: “Everyone, after reading this article, said, ‘We mostly agree, actually, with the thesis. At least when it comes to triple-A, we are just running at a fucking wall, I think, and we’re gonna crash on that wall really soon.’”

TOP: The “wall” Sasko refers to is the ballooning complexity and expense of making games like *Cyberpunk 2077*.

Many RPG players assumed that as CDPR had done such a fantastic job with *The Witcher 3*, it should be able to do the same with *Cyberpunk*. But *Cyberpunk*’s more immersive first-person presentation ended up making it a vastly more difficult game to build. “*Witcher 3* has so many fucking tricks,” Sasko said, explaining

THE CHALLENGE IS CONTROLLING PLAYER EXPECTATIONS

one in particular – the way it would often cut to black to stage scenes or transition between bits of a quest, letting the developers change elements easily. “Sometimes there’s a scene of a guy behind a bar, and he’s like, submerged waist-up in the terrain because we didn’t have animation. So he’s just sitting there: but he looks perfectly fine. Then you look at *Cyberpunk*. No cuts, no black screens, you’re ‘in’ V all the time. Staging is in-person. It got so incredibly more expensive to generate branches. Adding branches to *Witcher 3* was so easy in comparison.”

Former *Dragon Age* creative director Mike Laidlaw said the

BOXING CLEVER

IF EA WON'T DO IT...



Ash Habib, a lifelong boxing fan, was disappointed no one was making pro boxing videogames any more, so he decided to make his own. *Undisputed* sits at 'mostly positive' reviews on Steam: but the biggest fans are boxers themselves, relishing the chance to be in a videogame. ■ **RS**

SALES FIGHTER

GREAT EXPECTATIONS



Street Fighter 6 is almost in our hands, and you better be buying copies for all your friends. Capcom president Haruhiro Tsujimoto has set a rather ambitious 10 million sales goal for the fighter. That's three million more than *SF5*'s lifetime sales. For the FGC's sake, I sure hope we hit that target. ■ **MT**



SAINTS ABOVE!

SAINTS ROW OVERHAUL



Last year's *Saints Row* reboot released to pretty poor reception, so much so that developer Volition was merged with Gearbox. But the game hasn't been left to rot – a new update has overhauled the combat and adjusted missions, as well as adding features such as a selfie mode and emotes. ■ **RV**



TOP: Sasko says *Disco Elysium*'s a great example of an RPG that could add narrative branches relatively cheaply, thanks to the text-heavy, top-down presentation.

ABOVE: "As soon as you're delivering something that starts to be cinematic, you then are essentially inviting comparison to the most cinematic things," says Laidlaw.

challenge is controlling player expectations, adding that while working on games like *Jade Empire* and *KotOR*, BioWare had simple tools for creating most conversations.

"I do think what you guys tackled with *Cyberpunk* was so phenomenally aggressive and I'm terrified at what that must have done to all of you," Laidlaw said. "It was like the unbroken perspective of *Half-Life 2* but with all the branching and stuff from all your titles."

A QUESTION OF QUALITY

Laidlaw mentioned *Wilderness* as an example of effective procedural narrative, and Strix Beltran, the narrative director of Hidden Path Entertainment's upcoming D&D RPG, predicted that procedural narrative tools will help "crack the code" of pricey triple-A game development by making it easier to tell larger-scale stories, though they won't be a cure-all. "What is quality? I don't want to interrogate how you judge a game, but there's so many things that make a game good. I prefer to focus on emotionality." ■

Wes Fenlon



Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Granny fever

Hunt: Showdown added an elderly woman to its roster, and fans are going ga-ga to be in the granny gang.

Past words

Google is to roll out passkey tech – a replacement for passwords.

Cheat this

Activision's Ricochet anti-cheat system is now tormenting *Call of Duty* cheaters.

Watt?

Cryptocurrency mining in the US sucked down more energy than every computer in the entire country last year.

Redfail

Arkane's vamp-'em-up arrived to disappointing review scores.

This is fine

Geoffrey Hinton, 'the Godfather of Deep Learning', has resigned from Google.

LOWS



The Spy

BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

Rebellion can take many forms. Sometimes it's standing up to the evil empire that's working to destroy your way of life, setting you up for a journey of discovery. Sometimes it's in smaller acts – like The Spy realising that if you write even a veiled reference to a specific movie franchise in the intro for your column, you might be able to claim your Disney+ subscription as a business expense.

Sometimes rebellion is finally breaking the silence about a corporate decision you disagreed with. That was the move taken by one Michael Barclay, current lead designer at Naughty Dog and a former junior designer at Free Radical. “I feel like it's been long enough now to come out and say *Star Wars Battlefront III* was gonna be legit incredible,” he wrote on Twitter, responding to a post asking game developers to share stories of the ‘one that got away’. “The fact it got cancelled two yards from the finish line is an absolute crime. Gamers don't know what they were robbed of,” Barclay ended.

Barclay is referring to the third game in the original *Battlefront* series, before DICE's multiplayer reboot. While the first two games were developed by Pandemic Studios, LucasArts tasked *TimeSplitters* developer Free Radical with the third. “It was going well,” Free Radical co-founder David Doak told Eurogamer back in a 2012 post-mortem. “In fact it was going so well that we were going to make two, and they were letting us do some interesting stuff with the mythology.”

TIME TO SPLIT

Alas, it wasn't to be. Free Radical started work on the game in 2006, but, in 2008, LucasArts president Jim Ward left the company. The new management, looking to crack down on spending, cancelled a bunch of projects. “To be fair [*Battlefront III*] wasn't finished,” Doak told Eurogamer, “but it was very far from a car crash and had interesting ideas.”

Sometimes rebellion is thinking about drawing a connection between the corporate obsession with the bottom line at the expense of workers, and a fantasy story containing heroes and villains, but then deciding against it because it would be a trite cliché.



And sometimes rebellion is more subtle and mysterious. Why, for instance, did Bethesda add a new Steam branch to *Fallout 4* named “newvegas2”? Whatever the reason, it certainly has nothing to do with any sequel to *Fallout: New Vegas*. Steam branches are used to distribute different builds of a game. The default branch is what gets downloaded to your hard drive when you tell Steam to install something. But developers can also add

other versions that can be downloaded through a game's beta options. This is, for instance, a common way to share a review build of a game with journalists ahead of release.

What it absolutely isn't is a way to secretly distribute an unannounced videogame. The thing about Steam branches is that you can call them whatever you want. Shortly after

creating the “newvegas2” branch, it was removed and replaced with a new branch named “dechirico” – presumably a codename for whatever is actually going on. This is likely to be *Fallout 4*'s next-gen upgrade. As for why Bethesda chose this build name – The Spy's final act of rebellion will be to avoid speculation. Spy out. ■

The Spy



THE SPY
The Spy regrets hiring many Bothans.

ULTRACORE
CYBORG NINJA



EXPLORER
SPACE FLIGHT



HYPERGATE
LIGHTNING ELITE



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INSANE PERSONALISED BUILDS.

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Special Report

PCPP INVESTIGATES

Your gaming PC's interior doesn't have to look like this to deliver fun.

CULTURE WAR

Why did the PC gaming community learn to hate prebuilt computers?

Adust-capped Alienware Aurora whirrs underneath my desk. It arrived with turquoise accents, onyx plates and an array of parts pre-assembled by the boutique manufacturer. I've never constructed my own machine by hand. For many years, I did the majority of my gaming on a laptop, which was packed with so much tech that it felt like hauling a cement block around in my backpack. But in 2020, I decided to take a formal jump into the hobby. The Aurora is a no-doubts-about-it gaming PC. At last, I had finally seen the way, the truth, and the light.

So why did I still feel like a bit of a fraud? Because I knew that the purest distillation of PC gaming – its Platonic Ideal – has nothing to do with the games themselves. To truly feel like I belonged I needed to piece together the guts of a machine like Lego blocks, snapping the graphics cards and RAM into place, before the moment of truth where I pressed the power button and hoped that everything fired without a hitch. A prebuilt, on the other hand, remains anathema to the lifers.

BATTLE LINES

Confirmation of this bias is everywhere. On the r/PCMasterRace subreddit you can watch ASMR-tinged

videos of RAM installation. A meme on the forum claims that prebuilt machines are overpriced, and could burn down your house. This dynamic has persisted across generations of gamers, despite the fact that Alienware owners and Newegg snipers have almost everything else in common. How did they learn to resent each other?

"My family bought our first PC in 1995 and over the years it became a Frankenstein's monster of parts scavenged from computers we brought home from our local dump," says Stephen Kick, CEO of Nightdive Entertainment, which resuscitates out-of-print PC classics (and a remake of *System Shock*). "It was through this experience I learned how to build a computer and I think for many people it became a right of passage to put your own machine together. When the first boutique pre-built PCs first became available myself and all my friends dreamed of getting one, but the prices were astronomical. If there was any animosity back then, it'd be because we were envious."

I too remember what it was like to visit a friend who was blessed with a monolithic supercomputer; cranking out the first *Far Cry* with sweatless fidelity. But a sense of envy no longer demarcates the prebuilt/do-it-yourself cultural divide. If anything, the jealousy has mutated to schadenfreude. It is mainstream consensus today that buying a smattering of parts and assembling them is



Peace offering

I've highlighted the most diehard, unrepentant custom-machine superiorists in this piece, but it needs to be said that arenas like r/PCMasterRace do also contain a lot of posts pleading for a more reasonable detente between builders and buyers. Once you get past the chaos at the gates, the PC gaming community can be a welcoming place – trust me.

THE MEME BATTLEFIELD *A selection of the anti-prebuilt memes that have circulated around the internet*



ANTI-DELL SENTIMENT
Circa 2018, found on the PC Master Race Facebook page. All that's missing is a free copy of Norton antivirus.



THE PICARD TREATMENT
Circa 2015. A downright ancient meme in the catalogue. There is no indignity quite like being an 15-year-old PC gamer.



ICEBERG BENEATH THE WAVES
Found on Build-Gaming-Computers.com. I'll be honest, I'm not sure what all those numbers mean.



THE VOICE OF REASON
I'll be honest, Marques isn't wrong! But with gaming PCs so easy to build now, it's a fact that you can save money with DIY.

cheaper than the premiums you can expect at Alienware, Lenovo, or Acer, setting aside the wonky pricing of the GPU shortage and pandemic supply chain issues.

“A lot of the hostility towards those who buy a prebuilt is, potentially, a frustration that they’re getting a bad deal, which comes off as an attack on the individual,” says Jesse, a 33-year-old from Charlottesville, Virginia, who moderates the r/BuildAPC forum. “Some people are definitely elitist, but I do think a lot of it comes from a misplaced frustration that certain buyers aren’t willing to consider their own construction.”

It’s a funny paradox. Elitists in every other field in geekdom – from Warhammer marshals to flight-sim aficionados – all tend to look down on those who aren’t dumping a ton of money into the hobby. But in PC gaming there is nothing more casual than splurging on a prebuilt. John Linneman, senior staff writer at Digital Foundry, prefers to customise because he feels that store-bought PCs are usually compromised in some form or fashion. But he also ruminates on the more physical joys of the ritual. There is a dignity in simply learning how a computer works, with your very own fingers.

“It’s a fun exercise that enables a deeper understanding of how a PC functions, which is valuable. In some ways, it’s never been easier to assemble a PC,” says Linneman, while also noting that some aspects of computer construction can still be downright frustrating. In a recent build, his PC seized up on a cold boot for no discernible reason at all. The culprit was a highly specific adapter converting DisplayPort to VGA. “This was a special case but there was zero indication what was causing the problem,” continues Linneman. “What I’m saying is that, when something goes wrong, it can be frustrating and not everyone has the desire to suss out the root cause.”

Linneman also speculates that the prebuilt schism might be mending. He points to the Steam Deck, which could go down in history as the single most popular prebuilt gaming computer ever. As PC gaming becomes progressively more agile, perhaps its hardcores-only seclusion will also wash away.

A MEME ON THE FORUM CLAIMS THAT PREBUILT MACHINES ARE OVERPRICED



PEACE COALITION

I’d still like to build a PC myself, if only because the war stories I’ve heard from those who’ve mastered the process tantalise me. Kick says that he flirted with prebuilt computers after reaching financial independence, but come upgrade time, he returned to his roots and started stalking PCPartPicker once again.

“The technology had changed so dramatically since the last time I built a PC that it was a little daunting, but once all the pieces were in front of me it was incredibly easy. After it was all together I not only felt accomplished but familiar with all the components and much more comfortable should I have to troubleshoot any issues.”

My Aurora will be outpaced by the processing curve, too. My standards will lower to High from Ultra. Maybe then I’ll finally take the dive, and lay out all of my doodads on the floor like it’s a low-stakes operating table. That’s what PC building ought to be: not a mandated rite of passage, but simply a fun thing to do, for those adventurous enough to do it. ■

Luke Winkie

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Secret Level

THE UNSUNG HEROES OF DEVELOPMENT

FOLLOW DESIGNS

MICHAEL HÜLL on being a level designer, and how he got there

Today, Michael Hüll is a senior level designer at MachineGames. He cut his level designing teeth elsewhere however, with multiplayer maps. When he was playing *GoldenEye* with his friends back in the days of the N64, he never suspected that he'd eventually be designing levels played by others with *their* friends.

The ability to play with others in the same virtual environment was always attractive to him. "I guess my first love in games was *Duke Nukem 3D*", he says, "because [while] it was not fully 3D, it was still awesome that you can play with your friends and you know, in those kinds of environments, just go around killing each other."

Some time helping out in an internet cafe sparked an interest in games like these, an interest that really took off when Hüll got his first computer with a modem. He dived into online play, and never looked back. He started creating maps as a hobby during his time off from the day job, driving a forklift.

Eventually, all those hours poured into his computer would start to pay off. Significantly. Hüll's big break came with Strike, a *Counter-Strike* map he created that was used in the CPL (Cyberathlete Professional League) tournament. When CPL went bankrupt, Strike fell out of use; but that wasn't the end of this map's story, thanks to a friend he had at DreamHack called 'Hellspawn'.

"He asked me: 'Michael, is it OK if we use Strike for our tournament?' And I felt like, 'OK, I guess you can use the map,' but at the same time, I felt like, 'Hmm, perhaps I want to make

some changes. Perhaps I want to make it better, perhaps even release it under a different name'. And he said, 'Yeah, sure.' A few days later, because you know, I just went straight to it... I released it under a different name. Which is Mirage."

CS:GO WEST

Despite having created what would prove to be one of the most popular maps in *CS:GO*, this was essentially still just a hobby for Hüll. But in 2019, Hellspawn recommended him and his work to James Harding at GD Studio, who gave him a job designing maps for the company's FPS *Diabotical*. "I actually had to learn a new engine to create the levels, but for me, that

engine was super easy. I actually learned it in, like, two weeks."

Creating a level is no simple task, however; it requires multiple disciplines. Michael gives the example of his most recent *CS:GO* map, Engage, which is set in a car factory. "For me to be able to create all these assets and stuff like that would be kinda impossible", he explains, "because first of all, I actually don't have the knowledge because I'm all about creating blockouts [draft assets without detail] and you know, the player space and all that. So for example, when you create a *CS:GO* map, you need at least two guys I would say. One is doing blockout, and one is doing full focus on assets. So to create a map for *CS:GO* takes approx one year, to create a proper map."

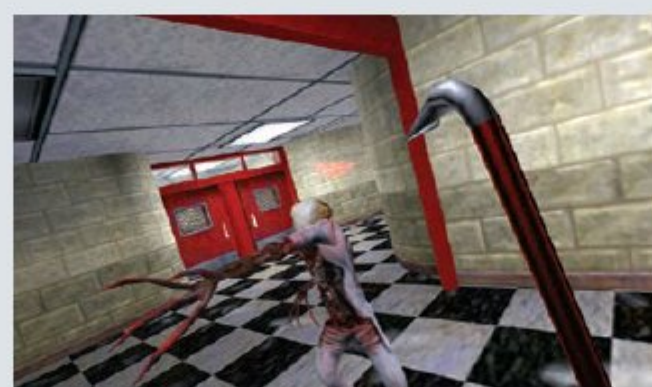
It took a long time and a lot of hard work, but Hüll turned his level designing hobby into a job. If you want to do the same, he has some advice. "I think it's a good idea to connect with different communities. For example, for *Counter-Strike*, there's this community called Mapcore, which is just the best. You'll get big forum threads, which really help a lot of people to get into how to create levels.

"So if you want to get started on something, I think that's a good way [to get started], to get into some kind of community. And then just talk to people, and start to learn. Ask them, because they have the answers. Then if you want to go further and have this as a job, I think it's good that you create your own portfolio. You're creating these levels, perhaps for your friend ... you're building [the portfolio], and then when you see [a job opening], go for it." ■

Luke Kemp

MOD CONS

Try your hand at maps for these games



HALF-LIFE

Modding for the Valve classic is still going strong. *Counter-Strike* itself started as a *Half-Life* mod.



FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS

People have been doing interesting things with *New Vegas* for years.



CS:GO

Hey, it worked for Michael. Why can't it work for you? Enjoys an active mapmaking community.



HALO INFINITE

Forge is a great way to start playing around with maps, a mode refined over several years.



**“I ACTUALLY HAD TO
LEARN A NEW ENGINE
TO CREATE THE LEVELS”**

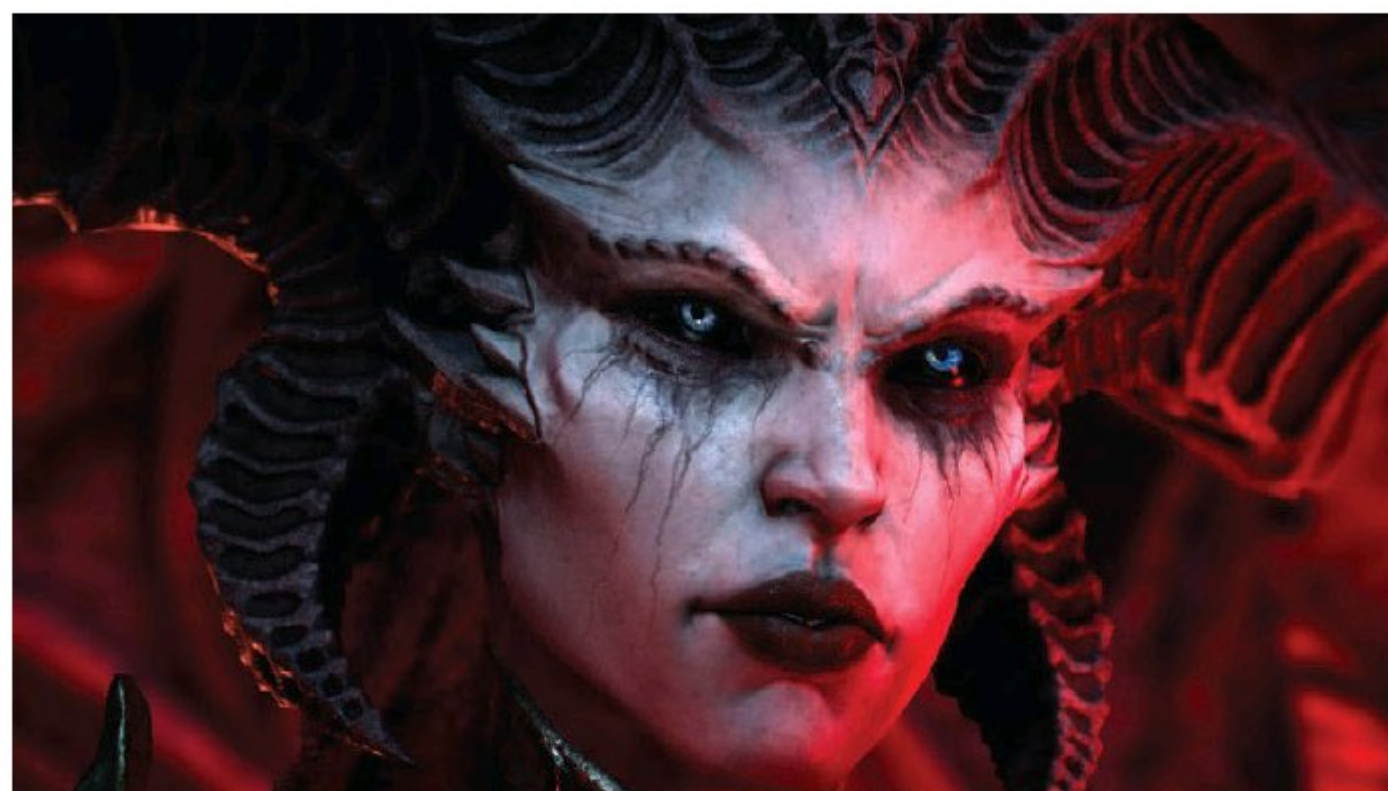
Engage is an old map Hüll redesigned with fellow level designers Catfood and RZL.



ABOVE: The big one! Mirage eventually became an official CS:GO map.

LEFT: Swamp, by Michael Hüll and Morozov, was introduced in CS:GO's Swamp Thing update.

3 months



DIABLO IV

RELEASE June 6, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Blizzard

The beloved action-RPG series returns once more with a darker look, plenty of exciting classes to play as and, hopefully, no auction house.



PARK BEYOND

RELEASE June 16, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Limbic Entertainment

Continuing the PC's storied legacy with theme park sims, *Park Beyond* lets you construct and then ride mind-bending impossible rollercoasters.



FINAL FANTASY XVI

RELEASE June 22, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Square Enix

Final Fantasy returns once more with gamers slipping into the shoes of Clive Rosfield during his adventures in Valisthea. Chocobos will be ridden.

6 months



EXOPRIMAL

RELEASE July 14, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** CAPCOM

Honestly, what's not to like here? *Exoprimal* promises gameplay where humans armoured in cutting-edge exosuits fight dinosaurs. Roarsome!



SEA OF STARS

RELEASE August 29, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Sabotage Studio

A classic turn-based RPG in the mold of 1990s classics such as *Chrono Trigger*, *Sea of Stars* promises an epic adventure and engaging combat.



BALDUR'S GATE 3

RELEASE August 31, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Larian Studios

The legendary fantasy RPG returns in the hands of Larian Studios, the talented chaps behind the *Divinity: Original Sin* games. Minsc and Boo confirmed!

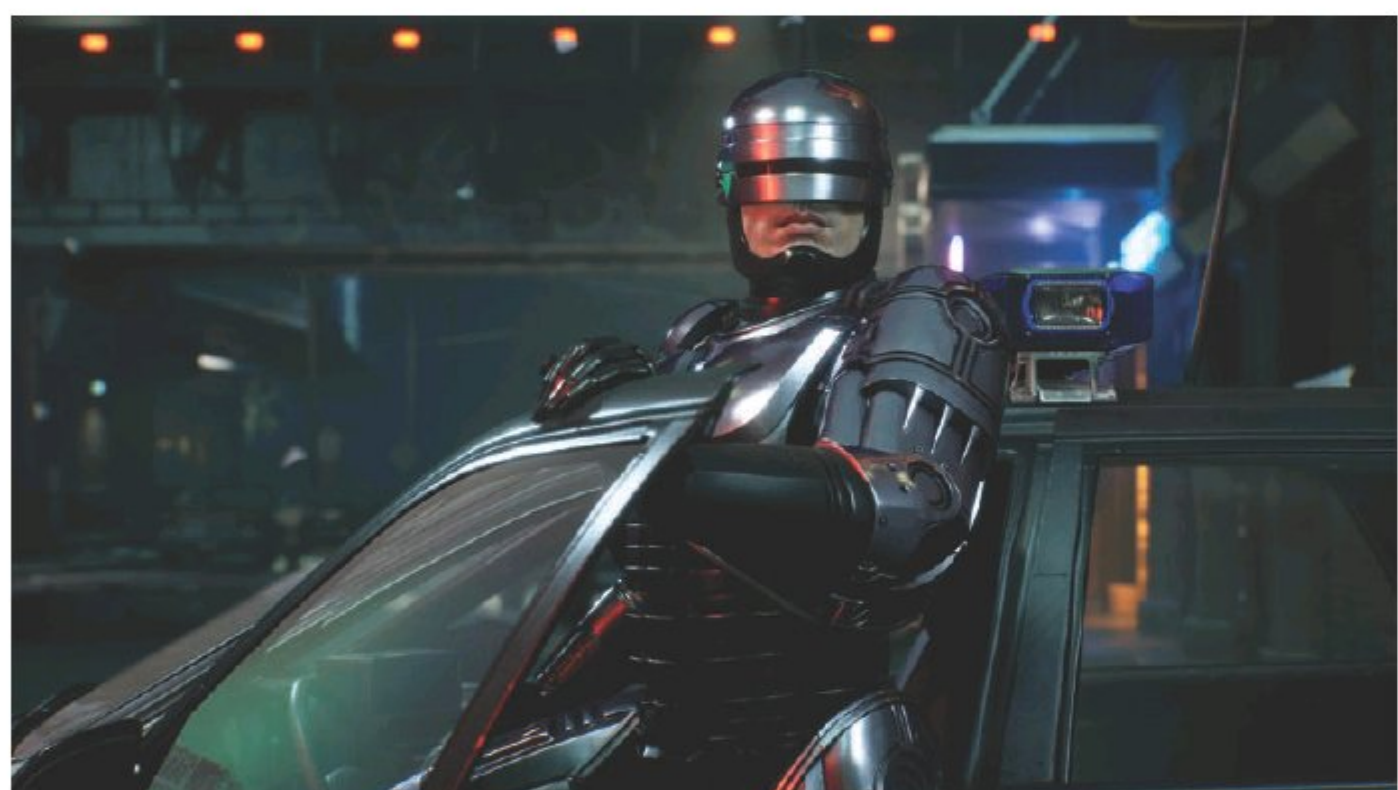
9 months



STARFIELD

RELEASE September 6, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios

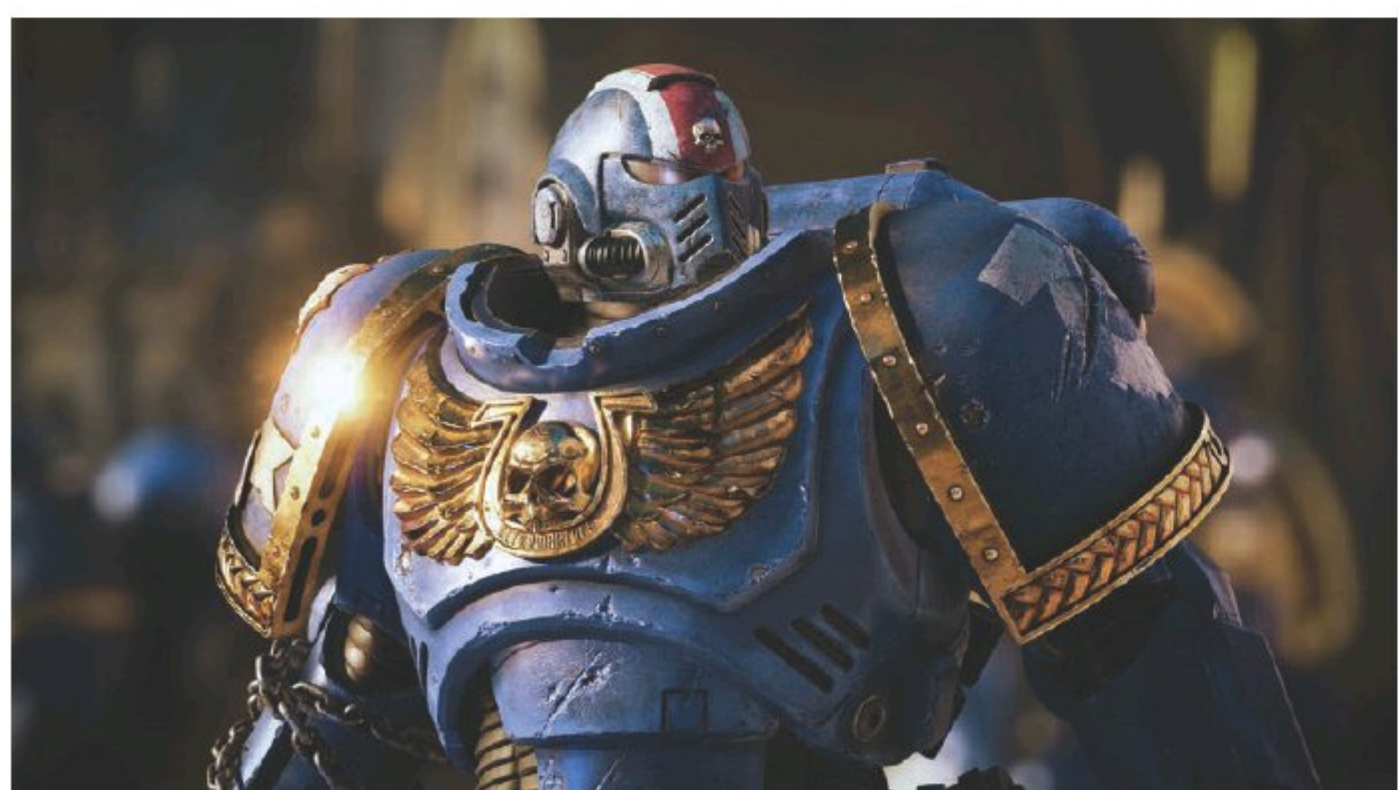
We now have a confirmed release date for *Starfield*, with the open world 'Skyrim in space' RPG dropping in early September. Start planning your character now.



ROBOCOP: ROGUE CITY

RELEASE September, 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Teyon

Part man, part machine, all FPS, *RoboCop: Rogue City* tasks you with cleaning up the crime-ridden streets of Old Detroit with guns, lots of guns.



WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Saber Interactive

It's time to grab your chainsword and warhammer, and get rending and crushing orks, tyranids and more once again. Action-packed, gore-soaked sequel incoming in 2023.

12 months+



CYBERPUNK 2077: PHANTOM LIBERTY

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** CD Projekt

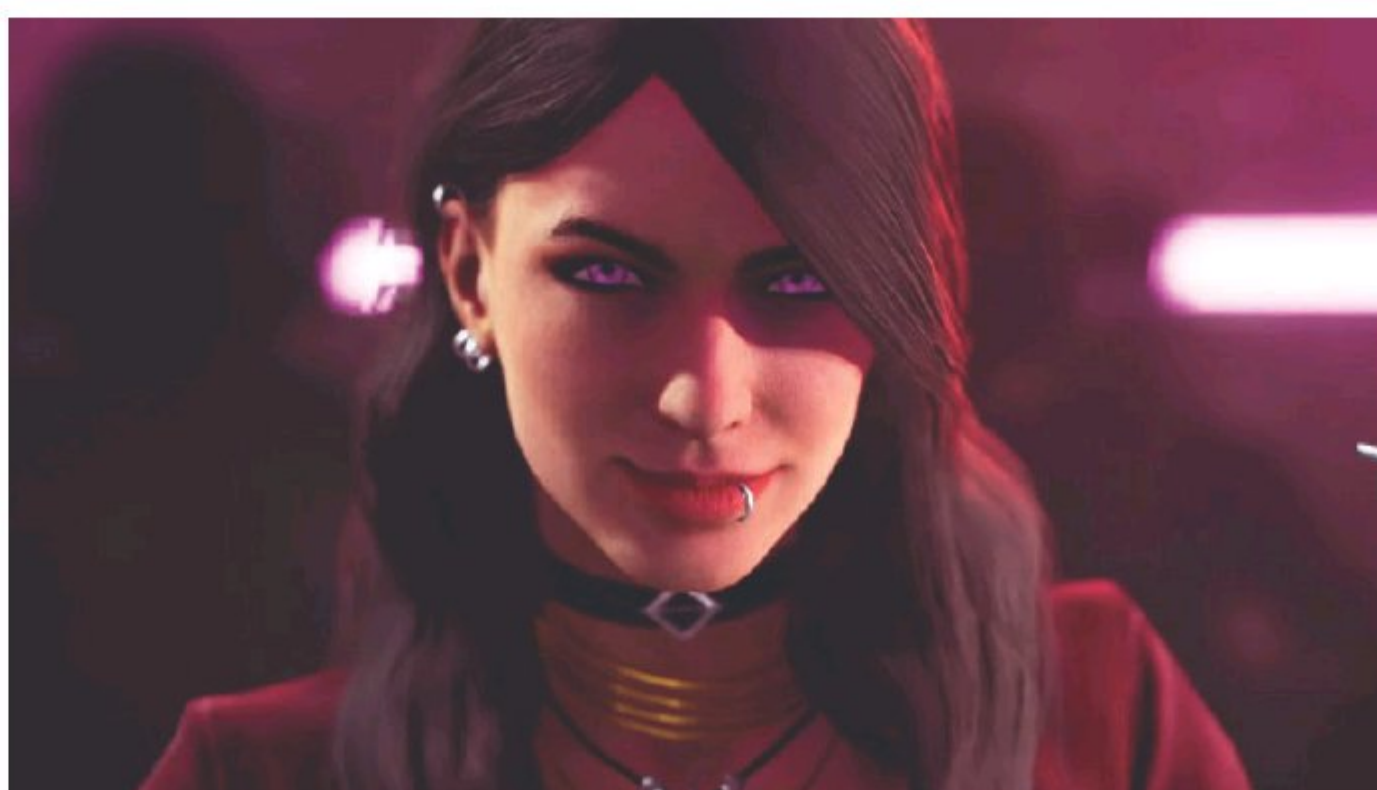
The much-anticipated expansion to *Cyberpunk 2077* is coming in 2023 and promises espionage and action, with Idris Elba playing new character Solomon Reed.



HOMEWORLD 3

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Gearbox Software

The venerable 3D real-time space strategy *Homeworld* series returns at some point in 2023, picking up the story after the events of the two previous games.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE 2023 | **DEVELOPER** Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, the current state of *Bloodlines 2* remains a mystery. Could the much-wanted RPG return from the dead this year?

ENHANCED

CYBERPUNK 2077
Cyberpunk 2077's Overdrive path-tracing graphics mode is now available and it looks great. However, it is really punishing on all but the very latest 40-series Nvidia GPUs. Luckily, talented modders have released a mod that brings a series of optimisations to Overdrive mode that delivers between a 1.25 to 2.0 times frame rate improvement. You can grab it here: bit.ly/3GOi637



MSI'S EXPERT-SPECCED PCs COULD BE JUST WHAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

MSI's technical and gaming gurus have created a set of very appealing PCs you can have right now.

When looking for a PC that best suits your needs, it can be a real challenge to balance your build to meet the performance needs you demand, at a budget you like. With so many different components and accessories on offer, MSI has stepped up and has configured a very appealing set of new PCs that bring together components that match each other perfectly and take the stress out of the big decisions.

MSI knows what gamers want. Of course, you will expect the big PC brands inside like Intel, Nvidia or AMD. Perhaps you know how much storage capacity you need, too. No matter your preference for price, CPU, SSD,

memory or any other components, they all need to connect to and communicate with each other to deliver the experience you're after. MSI has carefully curated several different gaming PCs where all the components come together in harmony, and you can pick any of these up from trustworthy and familiar Australian resellers.

MSI provides a wide array of motherboards for both Intel and AMD platforms that cater to any budget and a wide array of feature sets. However, MSI doesn't just make motherboards, it does graphics cards, cooling solutions, cases, SSDs

and more, all of which make a great choice when building PCs. So much so that various resellers are using MSI extensively in their pre-built PC offerings.

We've selected a few here to showcase but there are many more available should you spend the time to look around. Covering a wide range of price points and specifications these offer some great choices no matter what you're after, be it casting potent spells in Harry Potter Hogwarts Legacy, editing and encoding your latest YouTube video or hopping on the AI and machine learning bandwagon, one of these systems should suit.



GOOD

Centre Com Karuza Taurus Gen12 i5 GeForce RTX 3060

\$1,699 - <https://msi.gm/KaruzaTaurus3060>

This affordable system ticks a lot of boxes. First is the CPU. Socketed in an MSI B660M motherboard, the Intel i5-12400F was one of last generations best budget choices and remains so even today. Paired with an RTX 3060 1080p gaming at high refresh rates shouldn't be difficult and even 1440p with a sprinkling of ray tracing in the latest titles isn't out of the question thanks to the roomy 12GB of VRAM which will keep this system relevant for a long while yet. 16GB of RAM is perfect as is the 650W power supply. The cherry on top is the 1TB SSD, double what one might typically expect at this price.

SPECS

CPU: Intel Core i5-12400F
COOLER: OEM
MOTHERBOARD: MSI B660M
GRAPHICS: MSI GeForce RTX 3060 VENTUS 2X OC 12GB LHR
MEMORY: 16GB 3200MHz DDR4
STORAGE: Kingston SNVS/1000G 1TB NV1 M.2 NVME SSD
POWER SUPPLY: 650W
CASE: MSI ATX MAG FORGE 100R



GOOD

Umart G5 Core Intel 13th Gen i5 Arc 770 Gaming PC - Dreamhack Edition

\$2,099 - <https://msi.gm/G5Core>

Sporting what could be considered this generation's best bang for the buck CPU for gamers and light content creations, the Intel i5-13600KF is a CPU that can do it all. Sat in an MSI PRO Z790-P WIFI DDR4 board, it's matched with an Intel Arc A770. The A770 continues to improve and impress in performance thanks to big leaps in Intel's driver development, and is now punching above its initial weight class. The rest of the system is spot on for the price and with the addition of an MSI water cooler it'll keep that toasty 13600KF's temperatures in check for maximum performance.

SPECS

CPU: Intel Core i5 13600KF
COOLER: MSI MAG CORELIQUID C360 360mm ARGB AIO
MOTHERBOARD: MSI PRO Z790-P WiFi DDR4
GRAPHICS: Intel Arc A770 16GB
MEMORY: 16GB 3200MHz DDR4
STORAGE: Samsung 980 1TB NVMe SSD
POWER SUPPLY: MSI 650W MPG
CASE: MSI MAG Vampiric 300R



BETTER

Computer Alliance Alliance Forge i5-13500 RTX4070

\$2,749 - <https://msi.gm/Forgei5>

To keep the price in check this system trades CPU brawn for GPU power. Matched with the MSI Pro Z690-A WiFi DDR4 motherboard, the i5-13500 is just 300MHz slower than the 13600K, a small price to pay to allow more of the build cost to go towards the lovely RTX 4070 graphics card that'll let you play many competitive titles at high refresh rates or big triple-A games at 4K if you're careful with settings. Speedy RAM and SSD will keep the CPU well fed and a beefier power supply is good for longevity as well. A gaming rig that balances the scales well in all the right ways.

SPECS

CPU: Intel Core i5-13500
COOLER: MSI MAG CORELIQUID C240 ARGB AIO
MOTHERBOARD: MSI PRO Z690-A WIFI DDR4
GRAPHICS: MSI RTX4070 12GB VENTUS 2X OC
MEMORY: 16GB DDR4 G.Skill Trident Z NEO 3600MHz
STORAGE: 1TB Samsung 980 M.2 PCIe SSD
POWER SUPPLY: 750W Cooler Master MasterWatt
CASE: MSI ATX MAG FORGE 100R



BETTER

Centre Com Karuza Taurus AMD5 7700X GeForce RTX 4070 Ti

\$3,699 - <https://msi.gm/KaruzaTaurus4070Ti>

Getting serious about gaming? This rig based on the MSI MAG B650M is the sweet spot for price and performance. The Ryzen 7 7700X is one of AMD's better CPUs for gaming. Matched with an RTX 4070 Ti, you'll have better than RTX 3090 levels of performance, meaning 4K gaming with ray tracing is quite doable, though if you like high frame rates this will be best suited to 1440p or ultrawide resolutions for comfortable 144Hz+ gaming. A roomy 32GB of RAM is included, which the new standard for higher calibre systems. The 1TB SSD is great to have and the 850W PSU means plenty of power on tap should you want to upgrade something in future.

SPECS

CPU: AMD Ryzen 7 7700X
COOLER: MSI MAG CORELIQUID C240 ARGB AIO
MOTHERBOARD: MSI MAG B650M MORTAR WIFI
GRAPHICS: MSI GeForce RTX 4070 Ti SUPRIM X 12GB
MEMORY: 32GB Kingston Fury Beast RGB DDR5 6000MHz
STORAGE: Kingston NV2 1TB PCIe 4.0 NVMe M.2 SSD
POWER SUPPLY: MSI MPG A850GF 850W
CASE: MSI Sekira 100R



BEST

Computer Alliance Alliance Crimson Ryzen 9 7900 RX7900XTX

\$5,549 - <https://msi.gm/Crimson7900XTX>

Decked out with plenty of RGB, this system, based around the MSI PRO X670-P WIFI motherboard, houses a Ryzen 9 7900 CPU. With 12-cores and 24-threads on tap, this system is perfect for those that like to work and play, or perhaps the more demanding gamer that streams and chats while gaming. Those extra cores sure come in handy when heavily multitasking. The RX 7900XTX graphics card is AMD's fastest card currently available, offering slightly better raster performance than the RTX 4080, you won't be left wanting for gaming performance, even at 4K. 32GB of 6000MHz DDR5 is perfect for AM5 and the 2TB SSD is equally great for multiple large game installs.

SPECS

CPU: AMD Ryzen 9 7900
COOLER: MSI MAG CORELIQUID C360 ARGB AIO
MOTHERBOARD: MSI PRO X670-P WIFI
GRAPHICS: MSI RX 7900 XTX 24GB
MEMORY: 32GB DDR5 Trident Z Neo RGB 6000MHz
STORAGE: 2TB MSI SPATIUM M480 M.2 PCIe 4.0 NVME SSD
POWER SUPPLY: 850W MSI MPG A850G
CASE: MSI MEG PROSPECT 700R



BEST

PLE Computers Labyrinth RTX 4080

\$5,789 - <https://msi.gm/LabyrinthRTX4080>

This white themed system looks cool and calm, but it's doing a good job of hiding how much raw power is inside. The i7-13700KF can be a furnace, but thankfully it's cooled by an MSI MEG CoreLiquid S360 water cooler to keep temps in check. Also socketed into the MSI MPG Z790 motherboard is the other big-ticket item, an MSI GeForce RTX 4080 Gaming X Trio. It's capable of serious 4K gaming with ray tracing and all the quality settings turned up. We get a split mass storage configuration to boost capacity with 1TB of SSD space and another 2TB via a hard drive. With an upside-down internal configuration, you can expect this system to turn your gaming expectations upside-down, too!

SPECS

CPU: Intel Core i7 13700KF
COOLER: MSI MEG CORELIQUID S360 360mm AIO
MOTHERBOARD: MSI MPG Z790 Edge WIFI
GRAPHICS: MSI GeForce RTX 4080 Gaming X Trio White 16GB
MEMORY: 32GB Corsair Vengeance RGB CL36 6000MHz DDR5 - White
STORAGE: 1TB MSI Spatium M460 PCIe Gen4 NVMe M.2 SSD, Seagate BarraCuda 2TB HDD
POWER SUPPLY: MSI MPG A850G 850W
CASE: be quiet! SILENT BASE 802 TG - White

PREVIEW



*Shadows of Doubt*

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE

April 24, 2023 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER

ColePowered Games

PUBLISHER

Fireshine Games

LINK

colepowered.com

SHADOWS OF DOUBT

An endless *Deus Ex* that could become a stone-cold classic

Everything pointed to Li Li Qiao. It was her husband splattered across the kitchen floor, her fat, wet thumbprint on the hilt of the blade that lay next to him, and her blood-caked size 12 boots that had traipsed tremulously out the door not long after the crime was committed.

Her associates backed it all up: a chat with the neighbours revealed she'd been seen emerging from the apartment in a state of visible distress around 7pm, smack-bang in the middle of the period that my cursory field forensics told me was the time the murder took place. When I visited her office, I was told she failed to turn up to work the next day, and she hadn't returned since.

One coworker said they'd seen her haunting a nearby bar, though, and after quietly breaking into its security room via a well-placed air vent, I was able to ID her in the surveillance footage: drunk, scared and with a guilty conscience only drink could quiet. I just had to buy a beer and wait for her to turn up again. When I slapped the cuffs on, it didn't even feel like a victory. Just a full stop at the end of a short, sad story. You can imagine my consternation when it turned out Li Li Qiao had committed no crime at all.

AMATEUR SLEUTH

Shadows of Doubt, which has just been released in Early Access, had led me up the garden path. The murder of Matthew Parker – Qiao's unfortunate husband

– was just another in a line of crimes that the game had procedurally generated as I explored its world. The victims selected and evidence scattered according to an algorithm, red herrings and all.

Although I'm meant to be a hard-bitten cyberpunk private eye, picking up word of murders on the scanner and solving them for cash, I'd made a rookie error. I'd focused on the parts that did fit over the seemingly minor details that didn't. I couldn't explain why, for example, Qiao would drop an incoherent note ranting about a promotion next to the body of her husband, but I was sure it'd all come together in the end. More fool me. Hoisted by my own procgen petard.

It's not just the crimes that are made up on the fly. The setting itself is too. Every time you hit new game, you choose a name and a size for your city and let the game conjure up a new stage for you to poke around in. Even the largest option isn't much bigger than a city block, but some of the buildings it generates are huge: imposing monoliths with 20 or so floors, each filled with homes, businesses and crimes. *Shadows of Doubt* is going for depth, not width.

PLAYED IT

Over the course of a loading screen, the game will generate street maps and building blocks, fill them with individuals with detailed personal lives and – because this is resolutely, determinedly an immersive sim – join everything up with a vast, random spiderweb of air ducts.

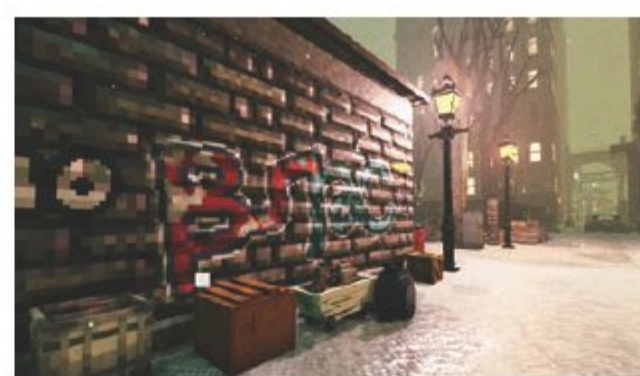
VOXEL NOIR

The game wears its Blade Runner inspiration on one sleeve and *Deus Ex* on the other. If for no other reason, ColePowered Games should be commended for finally putting money where Warren Spector's mouth is and trying to make the fabled "one city block dream game" that the *System Shock* and *Deus Ex* creator has spoken about for years. This game, with its rain-slick sci-fi noir presentation, multiple ways to solve problems and fully-simulated populace is doing its best to see that vision realised.

A lot of it works well, even at this stage of development. The city, rendered in voxels, is eerie and beautiful. Shadowy figures stand backlit in doorways as they refuse to answer your questions and

WEARS ITS BLADE RUNNER INSPIRATION ON ONE SLEEVE AND DEUS EX ON THE OTHER

Shadows of Doubt



» ghostly voices make promises from Tannoy in Chinese and English. The soundtrack is a low whine of synths punctured by horns, save the occasional bouts of silence: the only sound in the apartments you scour for clues are the footsteps of neighbours and the hammering rain at the window.

Although I've run into a lot of graphical bugs – most of them minor – in this early access build, nothing has really broken that spell for me so far. The cyberpunk vibes are exquisite. This is a game that appreciates the buzz of a fluorescent bulb.

Solving the murders you're given is satisfying, too. Because every single person in your city has such a wealth of information attached to them, and all of it can be accessed by picking a lock, hacking a computer, bribing an NPC, or just bludgeoning your suspect into unconsciousness and taking their prints as they sleep, cracking a case becomes just as much a matter of divesting yourself of evidence you don't need as acquiring the info you do.

You get a classic conspiracy theory board – complete with red string between photographs – for every case you take on, and my first one became such a mess of names, dates, places and codes that I eventually abandoned maintaining it and just kept the relevant details in my head.

I was more judicious with the ones that followed, and was rewarded with cases whose details were far easier to follow from A to B. Besides, can you call yourself a true PI if you aren't murmuring 'gotcha' as you tie a single line of thread between a person, a time and a murder weapon?

CONNECTING THE DOTS

You don't have to be a detective, mind you. Most bars have a notice board where you can pick up odd jobs like theft, surveillance, or even making arrests on behalf of the jackbooted 'enforcers': the game's tyrannical police force.

That kind of job board rings bells for me. For as much as I was prepared to fill this piece with references to the great immersive sims *Shadows of Doubt* draws inspiration from – *Deus Ex*, *System Shock*, even a smattering of *Dishonored* – the game I found myself thinking about most

often as I played was Introversion's *Uplink*, a free-roaming hacking sim from 2001. Like *Shadows of Doubt*, *Uplink* had a main thing it wanted you to do (*Shadows* will nudge you about murders, *Uplink* wanted you stop someone from assassinating the internet), but it also took place in a sandbox filled with all sorts of intriguing distractions, like vulnerable bank accounts and exposed servers.

Shadows is much the same and it's easy to wile away hours breaking into the vaults of the local surgery clinics to steal the augmentations that lie within. Those augs aren't usually game-changers, by the way – the one I currently have installed pays me 40 credits for taking photos of restaurant toilets, which isn't exactly *Dishonored*'s Blink – but they add fun little complexities to the game.

PURE POTENTIAL

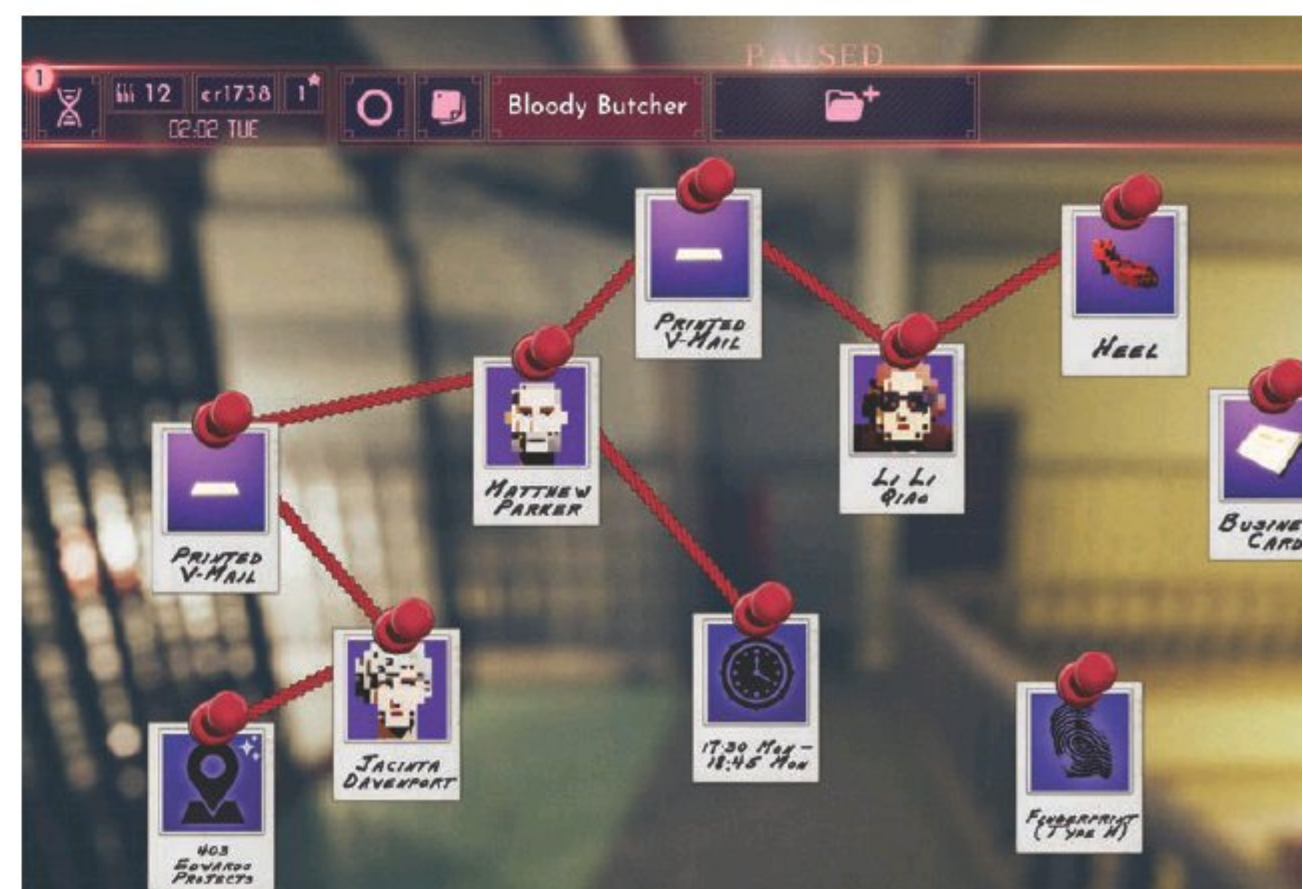
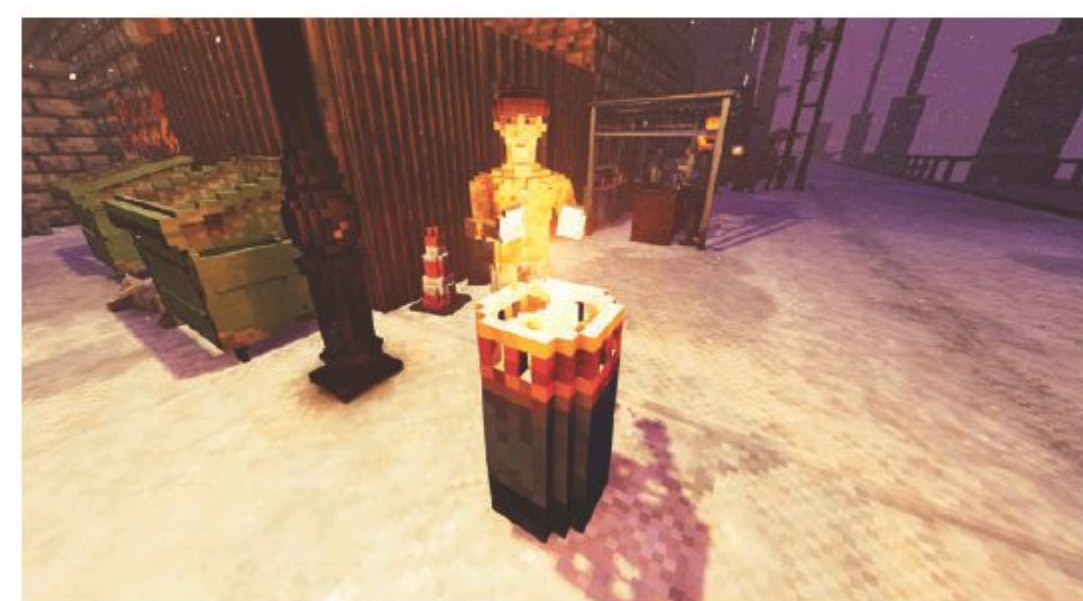
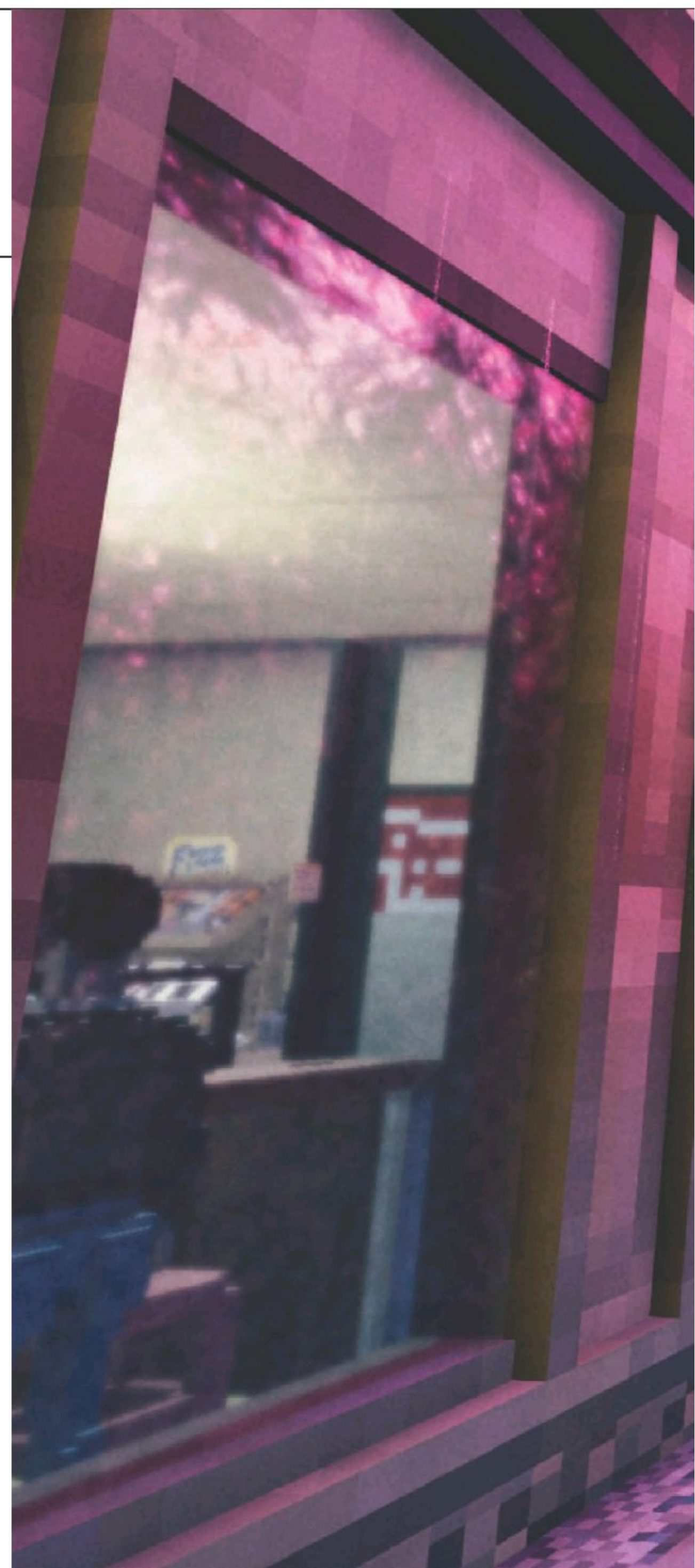
So colour me very excited to see where this one goes. It's not perfect: there are plenty of bugs to iron out and shallow spots that could be deeper. In particular, I'd like to see the game's many, many NPCs given a level of agency that matches their level of detail. I don't mean a *Dwarf Fortress* level of incomprehensible psychological and physical depth but right now the NPCs don't feel like characters in their world despite all the informational ephemera attached to them.

With the course of the game reliant on procedural generation, your engagement depends mostly on your own creativity and willingness to test and bend its systems. Letting the NPCs take a bit more initiative would take some of the burden off the player to make their own fun.

At least in the hours I've played so far, they just amble along their schedules. It'd be interesting to see them take a bit of initiative. Perhaps violent or paranoid ones could up and decide to take out the nosy detective on their trail. Some of them might even decide not to keep their super-secret personal passcode written down on multiple post-it notes. But if a game doesn't have that, is it even an immersive sim anymore?

Even if its inhabitants stay as docile and scatterbrained as they are now, *Shadows of Doubt* is one of the most interesting games I've seen in years. But with some smart choices during its Early Access period – which is set to last six months, but could be lengthened depending on player feedback – it has the potential to be something much more.

Joshua Wolens



The game's conspiracy board lets you go through the looking glass, people.

MOST BARS HAVE A NOTICE BOARD WHERE YOU CAN PICK UP ODD JOBS



ABOVE: True to the game's genre, it's almost always snowing or raining.

LEFT: How most of your cases kick off.

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PREVIEW

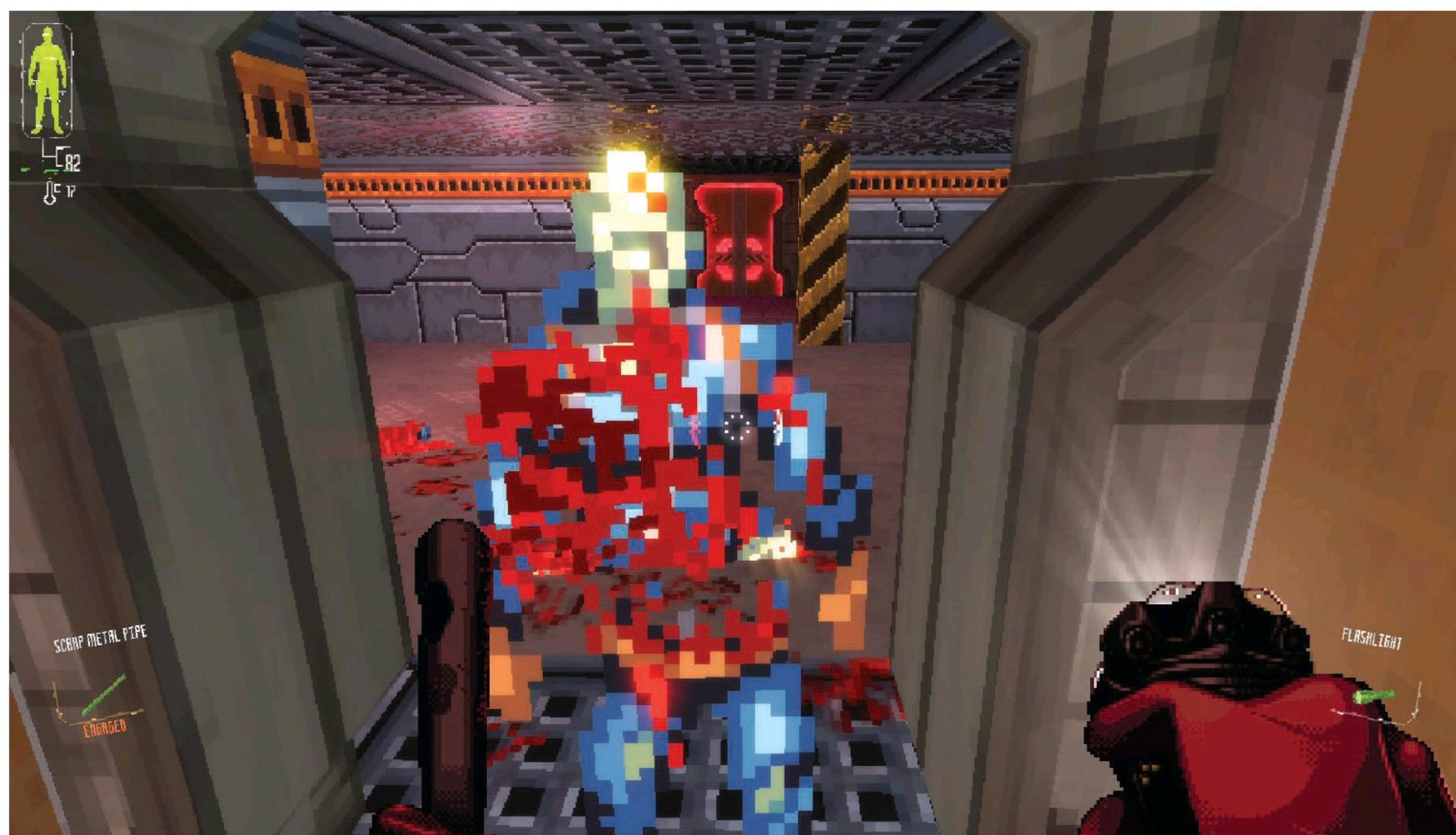
Hyperviolent



ABOVE: The bigger they come, the harder they hit.

RIGHT: I like to keep a lead pipe for close encounters.

FAR RIGHT: The inventory system is very *System Shock*.





NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
April 4, 2023 (Early Access)

DEVELOPER
Terminist Arcade

PUBLISHER
Fulqrum Publishing

LINK
fulqrumpublishing.com

HYPERVIOLENT

System Shock seeks Doom for old-school shooter shenanigans

Another day, another outbreak of zombification among an asteroid mining colony's workforce. It's a story as old as time, and Terminist Arcade's crack at the horror first person shooter genre looks to meld elements from some of gaming's greatest hits with a suitably retro visual style.

First-person shooters that take inspiration from '90s stalwarts are all the rage, and there's certainly something appealing about the latest crop that combine modern mechanics with visuals that wouldn't appear out of place running on a 486. *Hyperviolent* is the latest release attempting to bring this mix of old and new to contemporary systems, and does a decent job of setting the scene for what developer Terminist Arcade is no doubt hoping will become the genre's next hit. *Hyperviolent* has stiff competition in the form of titles such as *Prodeus*, *Project Warlock* and *Ion Fury* though; all of which inhabit the same 'sprite shooter' sphere; and if you've played any of those, you'll be familiar with what *Hyperviolent* is offering.

In *Hyperviolent*, a deep space mining outpost attached to the Commodus Asteroid 27-C has issued a distress signal and I as the unnamed, silent and strong hero answer the call. Owing to the strong Lovecraftian vibes being leaned into here, I'm loathe to compare said call to that of the great tentacled one. Rocking up at the asteroid it's evident that the crew have all lost their minds and are running around

trying to kill/eat each other and anyone else who dares step foot inside the complex. That includes yours truly.

Armed initially with just fists and harsh language, probing deeper into the outpost presents a host of horror tropes that are every bit as creepy in their pixelated form as they are in 4K: trails of blood leading through doorways, corpses propped up with "Help" scrawled in entrails on the wall behind them, computer terminals with redacted files that are clearly covering up what the hell has happened. It's all good stuff, and gives *Hyperviolent* a palpable sense of dread.

SHOOTS AND LEAVES

While the atmosphere is great then, the game itself is a mixed bag on both technical and gameplay fronts. The sound mix in particular is noticeably odd, and the engine occasionally hitches for no discernible reason. When you do finally encounter the forsaken crew members, they don't seem to exhibit any intelligence and simply run at you or stand there shooting with pinpoint accuracy. You can of course return fire once you've found and equipped a weapon, but aiming is inaccurate and weapons feel underpowered – even when upgraded. There's a definite sense that *Hyperviolent* is borrowing from

titles such as *System Shock*, especially with the inventory system. Here, you activate the inventory to equip weapons and items to either hand and the mouse buttons then correspond accordingly. It works well, as equipping a firearm and a melee weapon covers all bases; but trying to swap out a two-handed blaster means a laborious trapeze through the inventory which isn't ideal when under attack. Repetition is a worry as the locations traversed are staples, but the general aim is always the same: collect keys, solve basic puzzles, shoot stuff and exit the level. That said, it worked for *Doom*.

Hyperviolent hits the right notes in terms of story and atmosphere, and the RPG-lite nature of the inventory system, and interacting with NPCs is interesting. Gunplay could do with tweaking, as could enemy behaviour; but for an Early Access horror romp you could do much worse than spend a few hours playing it.

Tom Charnock

PLAYED IT

COLLECT KEYS, SOLVE BASIC PUZZLES, SHOOT STUFF AND EXIT THE LEVEL



Jagged Alliance 3



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBA

DEVELOPER
Haemimont Games

PUBLISHER
THQ Nordic

LINK
jaggedalliance.com

JAGGED ALLIANCE 3

Embrace the mess as all of your plans go up in flames

My squad of mercs were enjoying a day at the beach, following up on intel that an explosives expert was there. Instead, they found themselves in a minefield surrounded by foes. Several goons were grouped together, which was handy for my shotgun-wielding medic. One turn in, half of the opposition were dead. Then my mechanic stepped on a mine.

Chaos took hold. One of my squad went berserk, ran out of cover and just started spraying bullets. Another panicked, tried to flee and, of course, stepped on another mine. Someone thought it would be a good idea to toss a molotov into the mix. More mines went off. Bullets pinged off rocks as shots missed their targets. There was shouting, plus screaming and threats. A miraculous headshot finally ended the carnage, and somehow my mercs walked away with only near-fatal injuries. Just another day in the office.

Jagged Alliance 3 might be a dense, flexible tactics game where planning and precision are demanded, but it absolutely loves to throw those plans into disarray. Mines, a hidden enemy, a jammed gun, some foul weather or some misfortune courtesy of the gods of RNG ensure that you won't get too comfortable. You can play the same battle multiple times and have dramatically different experiences, even if your plan remains unchanged.

Despite being set in the fictional nation of Grand Chien at the turn of the millennium, it still maintains an '80s action

PLAYED IT

movie vibe, with tons of violence and lots of tongue-in-cheek silliness. To rescue the country's president and fight the Legion – the paramilitary group that's taken over Grand Chien – you'll have to hire an eclectic gang of mercs, most of them unabashed clichés, from the tank-top-loving Steroid – who gives out big 'Duke Nukem's understudy' vibes – to Ivan, a Russian lad who still sports a Soviet ushanka. If you've played *Jagged Alliance* before, you'll spot a lot of familiar faces.

Throwing these big personalities into a brutal civil war is a recipe for disaster. But good tactics games thrive on disasters. Without the threat of everything going to shit, *XCOM* would never have been the wonderfully stressful, heart-pounding game that reignited the love for squad-based tactical chaos. One day we might be able to get through an article about a turn-based tactics game without summoning *XCOM*, but Firaxis' masterpiece is relevant here because of the ways that *Jagged Alliance 3* approaches things differently.

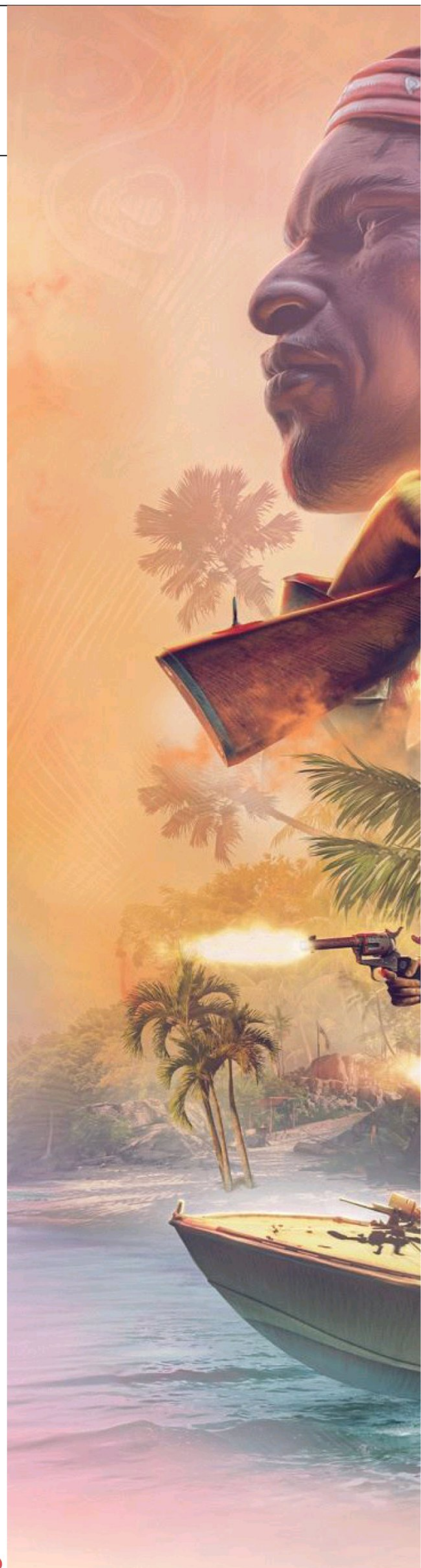
Unlike *XCOM* and the majority of games in this vein, *Jagged Alliance 3* eschews telling you the odds – a move Han Solo might appreciate but which I was slightly worried about. The likelihood of you hitting your target feels like essential information, allowing you to prioritise enemies and reposition your squad for a more effective assault. I thought I'd miss it, when in fact I ended up revelling in my ignorance. I was bolder, braver and frequently surprised.

IGNORANCE IS BLISS

The other benefit of the odds not being displayed is that it forces you to pay more attention. You won't be able to figure out the exact odds yourself, but you can make a good guess based on the stats of the merc in question, how far away the enemy is, what their stance is, and if they are behind cover. You can simply listen, too, as your mercs will literally tell you if it's a risky shot. But without that number making you doubt yourself, you'll be more likely to accept the risk.

You can always improve these invisible odds. Spending time scouting in real time before you engage enemy forces will help you pick a better position for your assault, for instance. If you've got a marksman in

TANK-TOP-LOVING STEROID GIVES OUT BIG 'DUKE NUKEM'S UNDERSTUDY' VIBES





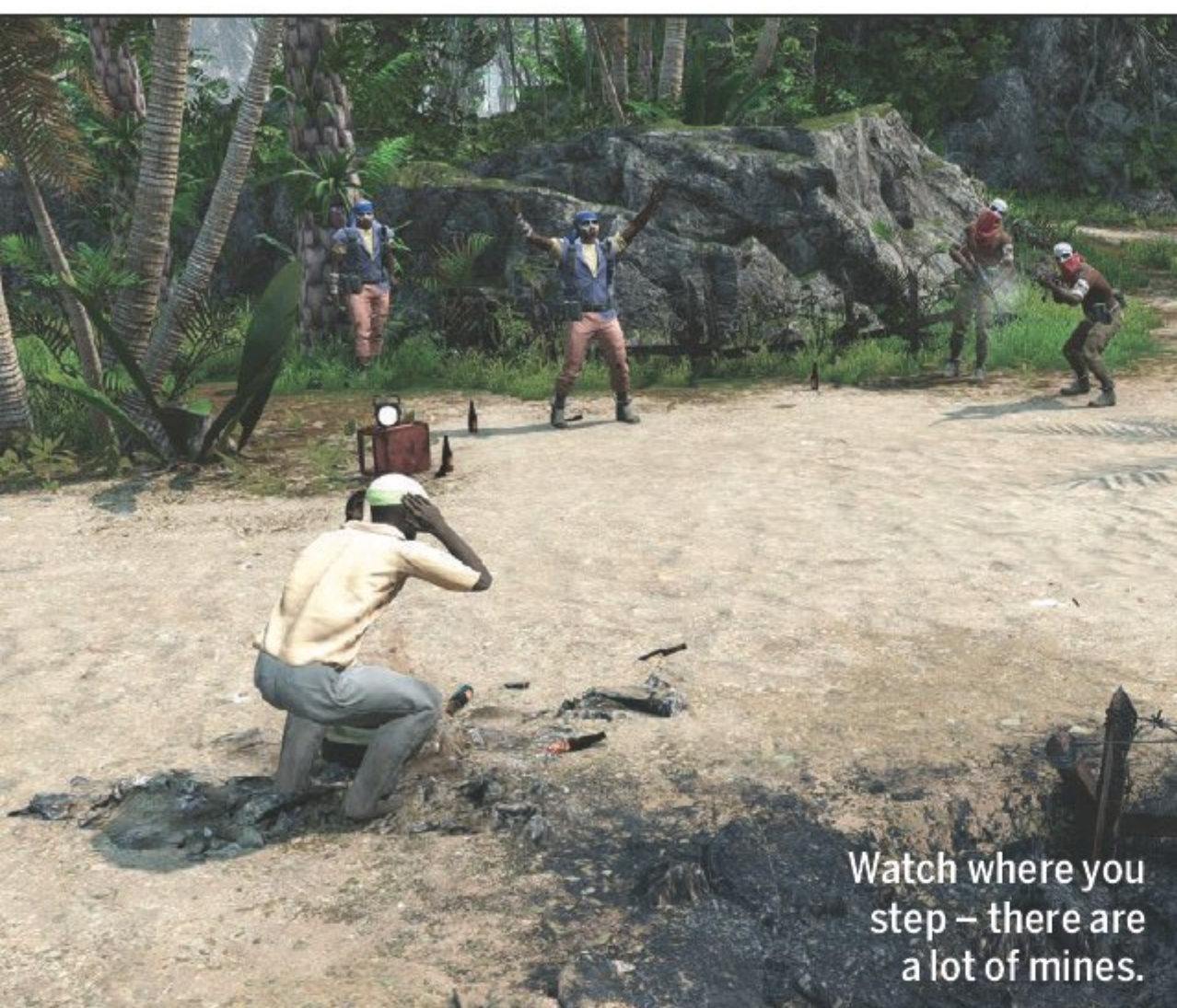
PREVIEW

Jagged Alliance 3

RIGHT: It doesn't take much to bring your mercs close to death.

BELOW: A heavily guarded entrance is an invitation to snoop.





Watch where you step – there are a lot of mines.



» your squad, you'll want to get them up high, whether that's a guard tower or just the roof of a building. Thankfully, all of your mercs are agile climbers. And when you're selecting targets you can spend action points to be more precise, forcing you to pick between accuracy and flexibility.

It's a lot more fun to watch fights play out when you're not able to predict the outcome, too. When I played in co-op, bombastic cheering and cries of anguish accompanied every encounter.

There's a great flow to it when you're part of a duo, as you both get to explore each map at your leisure in real-time, controlling the mercs that you specifically hired. Splitting the team up can get you in trouble if you encounter more enemies than you can handle alone, but exploration goes at a much brisker pace. And when a turn-based fight kicks off, you're able to command your mercs simultaneously, so there's very little waiting around.

MERCS ON TOUR

With so many tactics games being built around a strict mission structure, *Jagged Alliance*'s free-form sandbox feels incredibly liberating. Your core mission is to rescue the president, and throughout your time in Grand Chien you'll encounter plenty more missions, but you're largely free to explore the nation as you please and set your own priorities. When you clear a sector of the strategic map, you'll place it under your control, but your territory can be invaded. This is not only extremely rude, it's also a problem because these sectors can provide you with the resources required to continue the war. Run out of cash and you won't be able to renew mercenary contracts.

To avoid too much backtracking, you can create multiple squads of mercs, but that's expensive and you'll want every merc you can spare to be working towards your various objectives. Thankfully, you can also rely on local militias. Using your mercs with leadership stats, you can train the locals to defend themselves. This isn't free, and while they're running drills your mercs will not be able to do anything else.

Managing your squads is a lot of work. This is a full-blown RPG as well as a tactics romp, so each character has a distinct

personality and backstory, inventory, skills – hacking, healing, repairing – and even demands. Some mercs won't work together because they hate each other, others will get along well and even suggest you hire their pals, and sometimes you'll need to throw them a bit more cash to make them work with an arsehole.

You might expect the fights to be the meat of *Jagged Alliance*, but the RPG and open exploration elements are just as integral. You're dropped into Grand Chien with very little, so you need to spend a lot of time looting and making friends if you're going to defeat the Legion. Intel is important, too, and can be gleaned from chatting to locals and snooping around.

BUNKER BUSTER

After the mess on the mine-infested beach, I managed to find the explosives expert I learned about, and got an opportunity to talk her out of helping the Legion, which would make a later fight a lot easier. Similarly, after liberating my first settlement, I was asked to help defend it from counterattacks by hunting down a very large gun, which I was told would be in a bunker. The bunker fight was a tricky one where I sadly learned that not all red barrels are explosive, screwing up a perfect plan, but we got through it. And a big gun was not the only reward. We uncovered a bounty of weapons, enough that I wasn't even tempted to tell the villagers to screw themselves and keep the big one for myself. OK, I was a wee bit tempted, but only because I'm a dickhead.

The preview build was not without its issues, however. Along with co-op desyncs, I encountered an unkillable enemy who broke a mission, the occasional bit of weird enemy behaviour like wasting turns or moving out of cover for no reason, and the free aim feature definitely needs another pass – something's not quite right when my merc turns around and fires in the complete opposite direction. I really wish there were enemy vision cones, too, because I keep getting caught sneaking and it's rarely clear why.

Most of my time in Grand Chien has made me eager to return, though. I knew I was in for some good times when I snuck up some stairs to assassinate a Legion lieutenant and less than a minute later the floor was gone and the lieutenant, his goons and one of my own mercs were stunned on the floor below. God, I love grenades.

Fraser Brown

TO AVOID BACKTRACKING,
YOU CAN CREATE MULTIPLE
SQUADS OF MERCS

Humanity



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 16, 2023

DEVELOPER
tha ltd

PUBLISHER
Enhance

LINK
humanity.game

HUMANITY

You got some *Lemmings* in my 20th century minimalism

Before I declare *Humanity* a new member of the videogames-as-art canon, I should confess that I know embarrassingly little about art. My mum is an artist, yet I somehow developed no vocabulary for the subject – I spent the time I should've been writing about this brilliant videogame trying to decide if it was futurist, or constructivist, or minimalist.

Did you know there's a post-minimalism? I should try my hand at being a post-post-minimalist writer and turn in an empty page next time I'm on a deadline. But that wouldn't be fair to *Humanity*, which I've been playing nightly for the last couple of weeks. Perhaps this is a more useful aesthetic reference point: *Humanity* is an early 2000s physics tech demo turned into a proper game. It unabashedly pairs philosophical musings on life and war with block-pushing puzzles, like a more aloof *Katamari Damacy*.

Humanity has 'they don't make 'em like they used to' vibes. But they couldn't make 'em like this back in the day. What I mostly love about it is how it can fill the screen with hundreds upon hundreds of low-poly people, rivers of bodies flowing around the cubey maps. The hub world is a physics playground, a white space where more bodies than you can count mill about and the crowds part as your shiba inu spirit guide dashes between them.

Like PC puzzle great *Opus Magnum*, *Humanity* is at its most fun when you take your hands off the controls and watch

what you've designed. Mostly that's the placement of a dozen or so commands, telling your endless streams of bodies where to turn, jump, push a block and climb to a glowing pedestal that beams them up to the next stage of the afterlife.

Humanity changes up how you guide your flock to the goal. Conveyor floors and giant fans harry your path. Some levels give you a limited number of each command to place and keep the level in suspended animation until you press start; you're no longer allowed to place commands after committing. These, and others that have you pushing blocks into place, are my least favourite – they dip into tedium or get in the way of the flowing crowds. But *Humanity* never dwells on any one idea for too long.

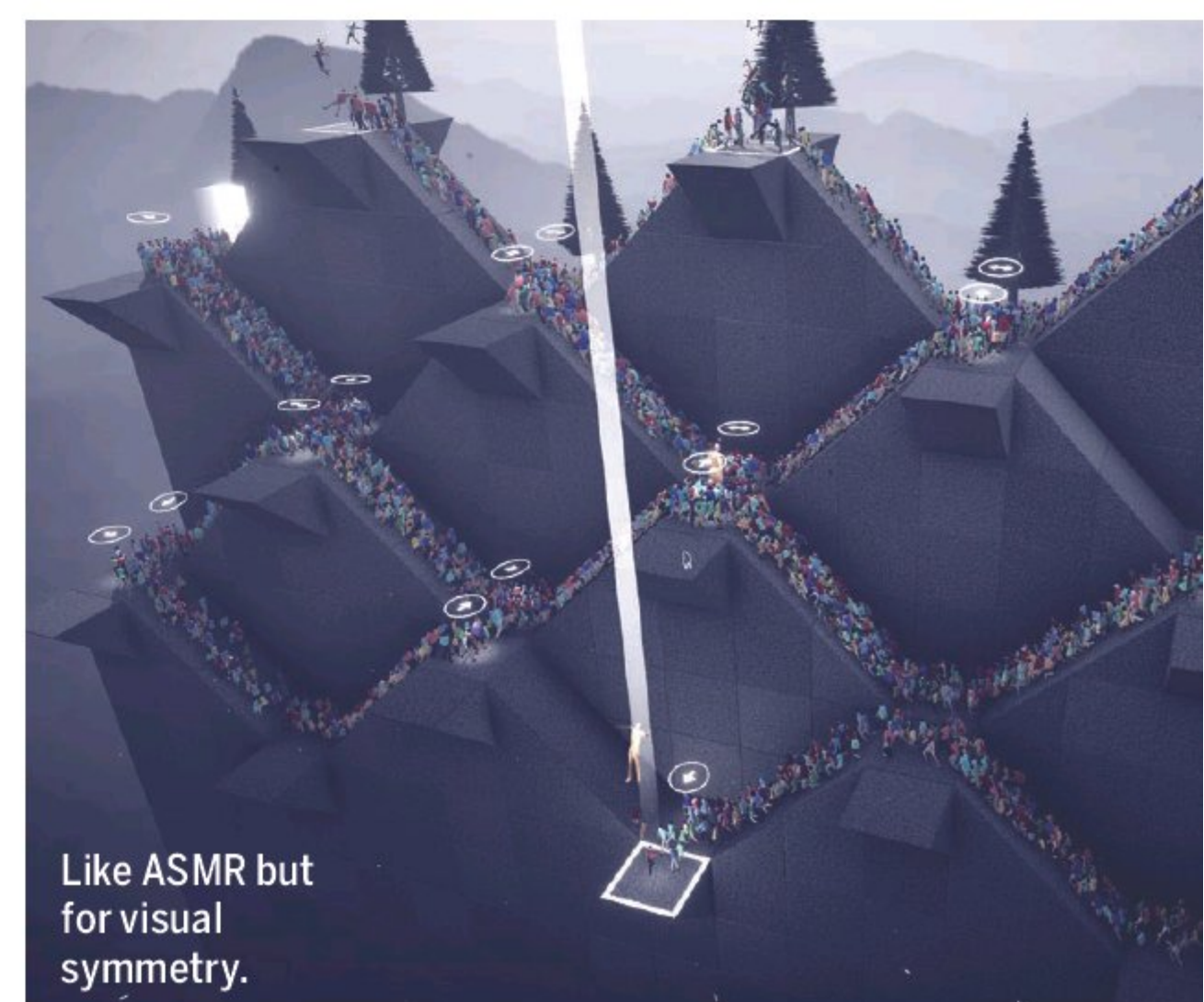
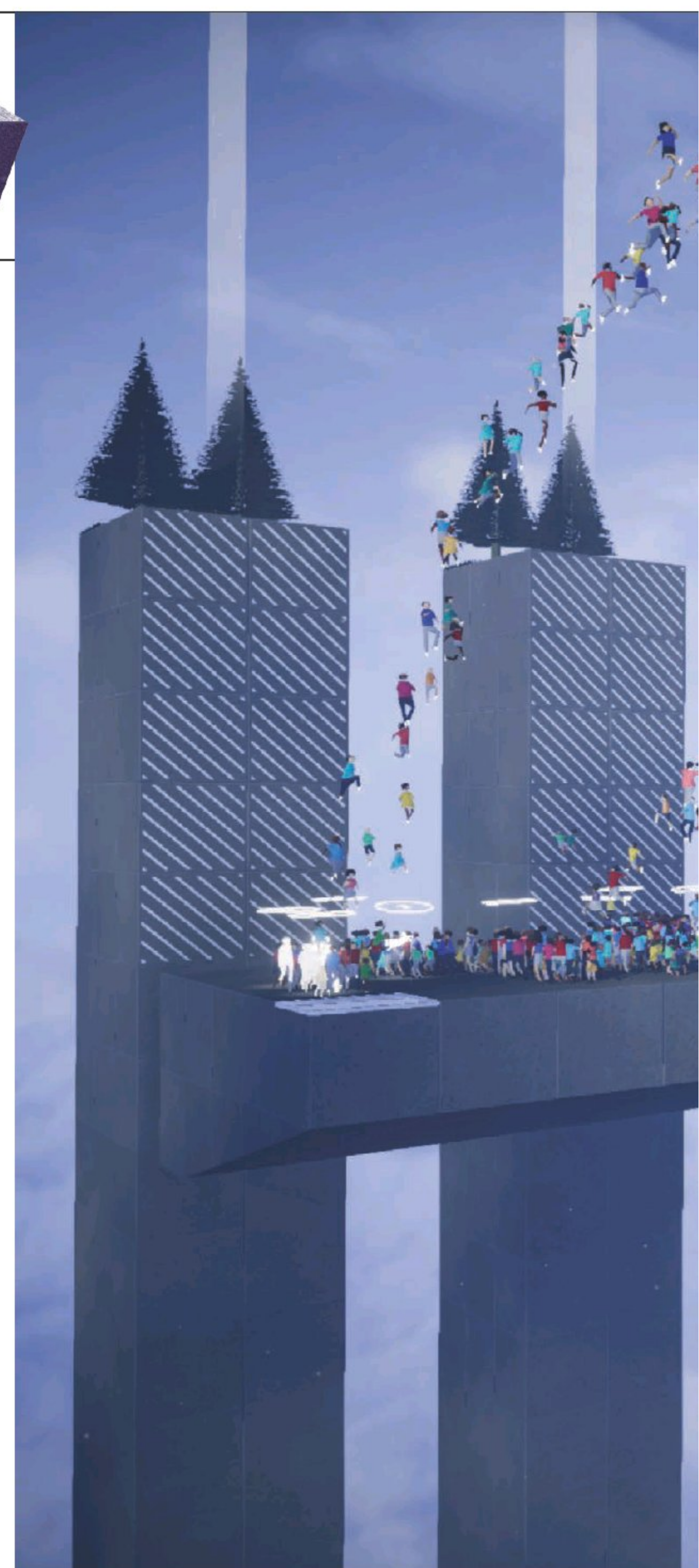
OH THE...

Some of my favourite puzzles pit you against another army of faceless people clad in black, who will beat your crowd senseless or shoot them when you get close. These levels slyly ask you to manipulate *Humanity*'s physics by splitting your forces into multiple streams. In one that still makes me feel clever, our two hordes were smashing into each other in a dead heat until I re-routed my line of gunmen across a bridge where they could provide covering fire. With that tiny advantage, I pooled a thousand baton-wielders into a corner before unleashing them in one wave to overrun the enemy spawns.

There's such innate gaminess to the puzzles that I'm still taken aback by how pretty it is to watch. As in Enhance's *Tetris Effect*, these simple colours and shapes are imbued with a profundity that's hard to articulate. You can imagine *Humanity* projected on the wall of the Museum of Modern Art, yet it can still count *Q*bert* and *Lemmings* among its ancestors.

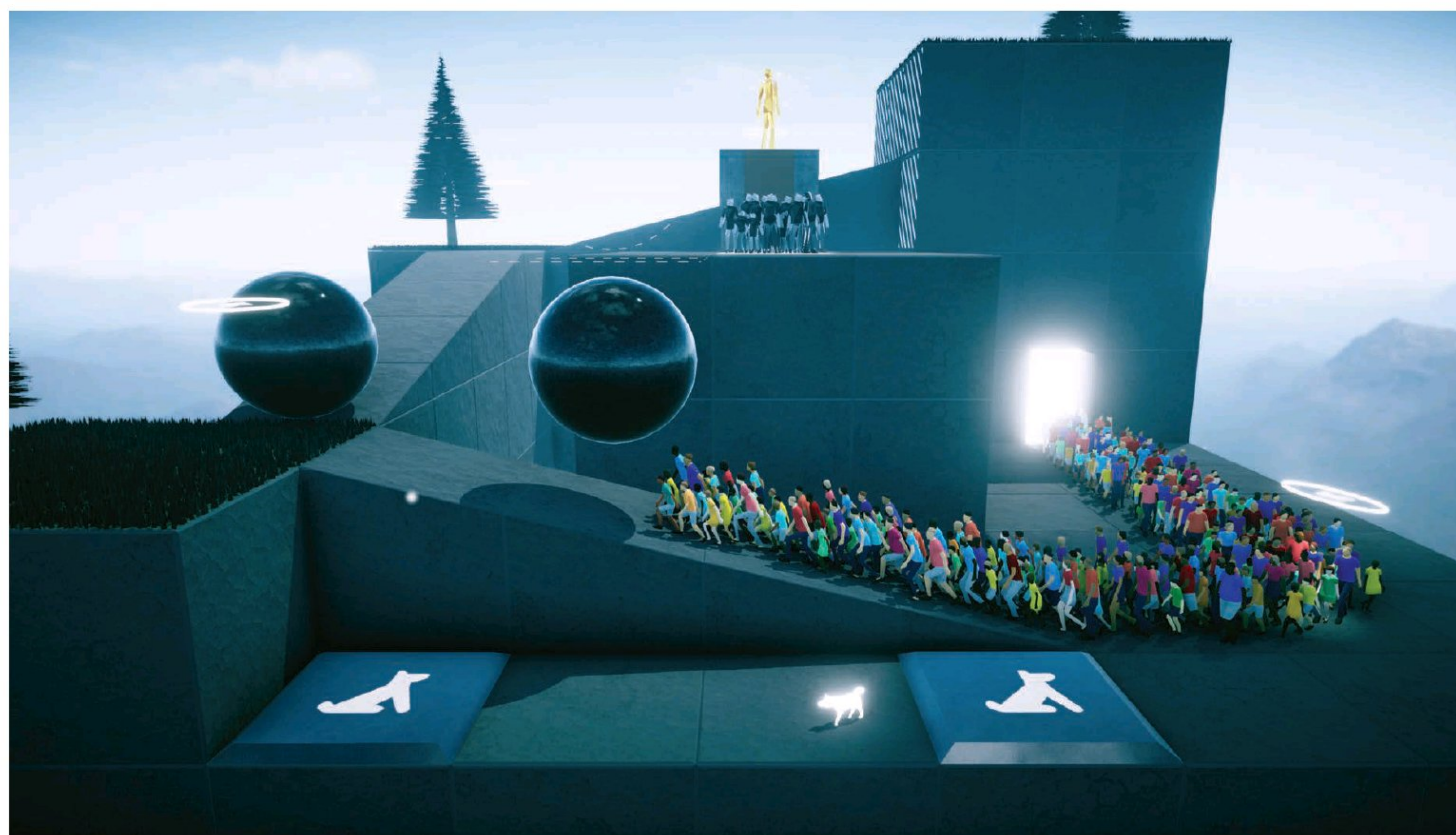
Humanity accomplishes this because it knows that its swarms of people are the star, and nearly every puzzle is in service of watching their bodies move in unison. When you play *Humanity* and find yourself stumped, just try to picture the solution that MC Escher would come up with. If you'd linger on the level to watch its infinite loop instead of hurrying onto the next, you and humanity are both on the right track.

Wes Fenlon



Like ASMR but for visual symmetry.

THESE SIMPLE COLOURS AND SHAPES ARE IMBUED WITH A PROFUNDITY

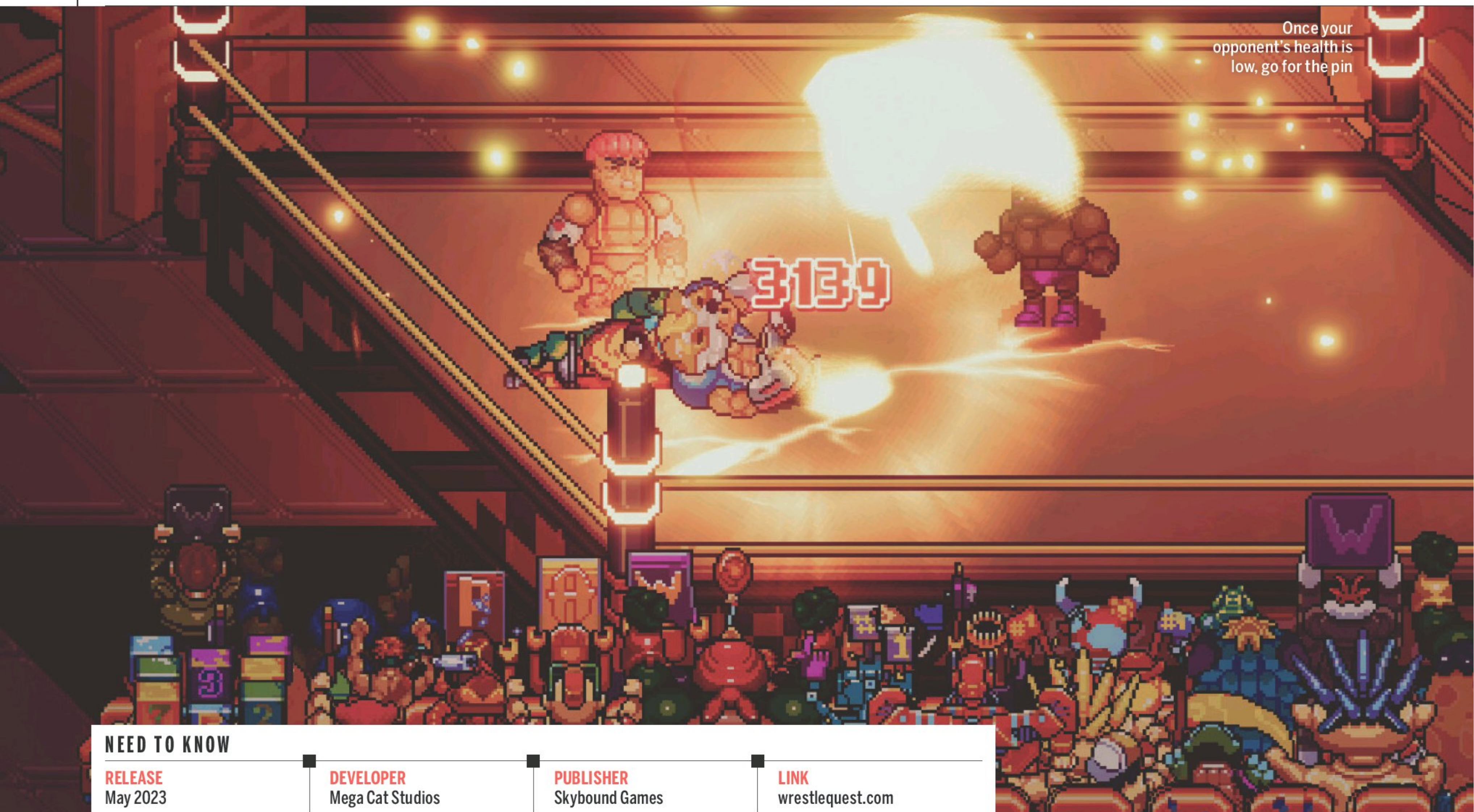


ABOVE: A soul dog will put a right spring in your step.

LEFT: It's OK to lose some people to giant, crushing balls. You've got an infinite supply.

PREVIEW ROUNDUP

By Jorge Jimenez



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
May 2023

DEVELOPER
Mega Cat Studios

PUBLISHER
Skybound Games

LINK
wrestlequest.com

WRESTLEQUEST

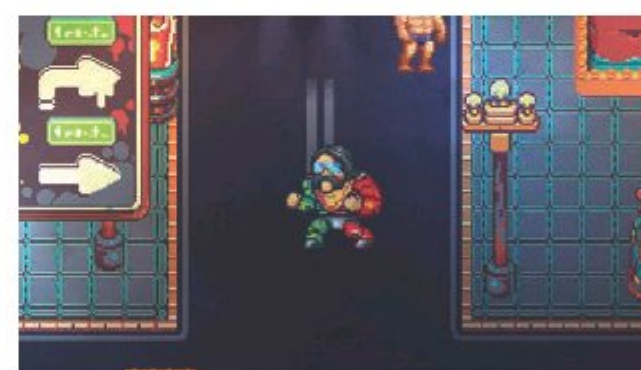
A wrestling-theme RPG that'll make you go, "OH YEAH"

Finally, a turn-based RPG that appreciates the wacky performance art of professional wrestling. *WrestleQuest* feels like a game an eight-year-old wrestling fan would have dreamed up. Meet the world's greatest wrestlers in a goofy adventure as you suplex your way to the top and make some fans along the way.

PLAYED IT

The glory days of professional wrestling are alive and well in this goofy yet charming wrestling RPG. In some ways, *WrestleQuest* is honouring all your old favourite wrestlers like Jeff Jarrett and Sergeant Slaughter, and of course, Macho Man Randy Savage. If reading those names makes you smile, this might be the game for you.

The story's hero is an up-and-coming wrestler who idolises the Macho Man and needs to go on an epic quest to battle baddies and help people in hopes of one day becoming the greatest



wrestler of all time. There will be times you'll get to choose to be a face (good guy) or a heel (bad guy) when cutting a pre-match promo or deciding what sort of entrance you want to make as you enter the ring. These little flourishes prove that the team at Mega Cat Studios aren't just wrestling fans but wrestling fanatics.

The 16-bit SNES pixel aesthetic is really nice, though the true charm comes in the design for the character models inspired by poseable action figures. Anyone who's ever just dropped all their toys on the floor and made them all fight each other as a kid will appreciate the vibe here.

In the ring itself, matches take place in JRPG turn-based combat. The twist is

that crowd work is just as important as bashing the opposing wrestlers over the head as you grip with a hype meter. Depending if the crowd is on your side, you can be hit with various buffs or debuffs. This is why you want to balance damaging your opponent and playing to the fans watching the match.

When your opponent's health is low, you can trigger a minigame to land a powerful finisher and pin them down to a 1-2-3 count. The presentation is fun, and watching these dopey-looking toys beat up each other never gets old.

When you're not pinning fools for the win, you'll explore various worlds themed after the careers of famous wrestlers, including Andre The Giant, Rocky Johnson, and Jake 'The Snake' Roberts. Expect to lace up around 12 playable wrestlers who'll join the cause.

WrestleQuest happily leans in on everything that makes professional wrestling great: over-the-top personalities and ridiculous action. Throw in the fact that this is all done as an old-school JRPG and we could end up with the sleeper hit of 2023.

IN THE RING ITSELF, MATCHES TAKE PLACE AS JRPG TURN-BASED COMBAT



KRIEGSFRONT TACTICS

This is my mecha rifle; this is my mecha gun

Kriegsfront Tactics reimagines the 1970s conflict in Southeast Asia with a bunch of towering mechs with silly paint jobs. It's as if the movie Apocalypse Now and one of the Front Mission games had a really screwed-up baby. Its low-poly retro art style will really strike a cord for anyone missing that classic PS1 era of

turn-based mecha hijinx with a touch of permadeath. You play a mech commander behind enemy lines whose squad must do everything possible to survive. You'll do this by outwitting your enemy with sound military strategy or, in my case, leaving a heavy mech out in the open as bait while a smaller, more agile unit comes up from behind and blasts them with a giant shotgun.

The demo I played was like watching a diorama come to life. As you go up against rival mechs, you'll have to consider positioning, weapon loadout and pilot skills. You may think you've got a mech dead to rights only to trigger a sniper mech's

PLAYED IT

overwatch. Nothing is more upsetting than watching a mech get blown up and getting a pilot KIA because of your own move.

RELEASE TBA	DEVELOPER Toge Productions	PUBLISHER In-house	LINK toge productions.com
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SLAY THE PRINCESS

Not your typical damsel in distress

RELEASE 2023	DEVELOPER Black Tabby Games	PUBLISHER In-house	LINK bit.ly/3LpWLQg
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Slay the Princess is a visual horror novel with a simple premise. Save the world by killing a seemingly defenceless princess

locked away in the basement of a remote cabin in the woods. However, neither she nor the game's narrator don't plan on making it easy.

There's a darker power at work, as you mysteriously reappear outside the cabin after every encounter, with each reset growing darker and more unsettling.

A STORM

WARHAMMER AGE OF SIGMAR: REALMS OF RUIN is a fast, accessible RTS – and a grand introduction for Games Workshop's mythic setting

By Robin Valentine

APPROACHES

Warhammer Age of Sigmar: Realms of Ruin



In 2015, the Warhammer world ended. You know, that place you fight over in *Total War: Warhammer* and *Vermintide 2*? Games Workshop blew it up. From its ashes rose a new setting, in a new era: the Age of Sigmar.

Such a dramatic move, driven by business realities more than narrative passion (it's complicated, but basically Warhammer Fantasy models weren't selling) inevitably upset huge swathes of the fanbase. Many of them have turned their nose up at Age of Sigmar ever since. But in the years since, the new setting has grown into a wonderfully rich, mythic and exciting universe of its own, where gods and their armies war over eight Mortal Realms formed out of pure primordial magic. It's a

fresh canvas for Games Workshop's biggest and boldest fantasy ideas, with a rapidly rising popularity among players.

Videogame adaptations, however, have been thin on the ground. It's had a smattering of mobile games and smaller titles, but nothing remotely on the scale of something like *Total War: Warhammer*. With its new RTS *Realms of Ruin*, developer Frontier is hoping to fill that void – and introduce gamers to a whole new world of Warhammer.

LIGHTNING FAST

Straight away as I'm shown early footage of the game, it's clear *Realms of Ruin* is a real-time strategy game in the traditional mould – you build units, send them into battle with a click, advance up a tech tree and activate abilities in the fray to try and get the edge. Its grouped up squads and focus on capturing objectives put me in mind of another *Warhammer* game: the classic *Dawn of War*.

But that doesn't mean it's just retreading old ground. Frontier is aiming for a fast and super accessible take on the genre. For example, though you can build pivotal defensive structures on certain captured points, and upgrade your HQ, there's otherwise no base-building in the game, and multiplayer matches are designed to take no longer than 30 minutes.

Sandro Sammarco, principal designer on the game and co-writer of its story, describes *Realms of* »



MARSHCRAWLA SLOGGOTH

These weird swamp beasts can smell blood from miles away, and are ridden into battle by screeching Grots (goblins) who beat out an invigorating drum beat.

STORMDRAKE GUARD

The Stormcast Eternals have a long-standing alliance with dragons, and some even ride to battle atop their flying, flame-breathing friends. You wouldn't want to be that Orruk getting it right in the face.

“IT’S ABOUT GETTING IN THERE AND STICKING YOUR AXE INTO THE GUY’S FACE”

» *Ruin* as “a burst of real-time strategy goodness”. The goal is to get players right into the action without any barriers to entry – and then reveal more and more tactical depth as you play.

“The core principle of why we’ve aimed the game this way, it’s to make sure that we’re being authentic to the table top game, which is really, it’s about battles,” says Sammarco. “It’s about fighting. It’s about getting in there and sticking your axe into the guy’s face until he doesn’t want to fight anymore. Games Workshop’s franchises are all about [that], there’s always a visceral nature to them that’s very compelling. And so we wanted to make sure that we were hitting that.”

Each unit’s place in that fight is made clear through three roles that

have a rock-paper-scissors-like relationship. Assault units are marked with a sword – they’re strong against defensive units, marked with a shield. Shields are strong against ranged units, marked with a bow, who in turn are good against swords. With troops as weird and wonderful as flying angels with lightning hammers and grenade-throwing hobgoblin assassins, the idea is that these roles will always give you a clear picture of the strengths and weaknesses in play.

RIDERS ON THE STORM

There’ll be four factions in the final game, all drawn from the tabletop wargame, but only two have been revealed so far: the Stormcast Eternals and the Kruleboyz.

Stormcast Eternals are a force of divinely-empowered knights that

HERE COMES THE CAVALRY

The RTS genre is back – here are some more games we’re looking forward to



STORMGATE

Stormgate is a spiritual successor to *StarCraft II*, developed by ex-Blizzard veterans, set in an apocalyptic world where sci-fi and fantasy collide.



HOMEWORLD 3

This unexpected revival is shaping up to be wonderfully faithful to its predecessors, while adding new depth to its spectacular spaceship battles.



TEMPEST RISING

Taking inspiration from the *Command & Conquer* games, *Tempest Rising* pits three alternate history factions against each other after a nuclear war.

**HOBGROT
SLITTAZ**

These malicious allies of the Kruleboyz act as intermediaries between them and Age of Sigmar's equivalent of Chaos Dwarves, trading captives for resources and supplies. That's where their toxic grenades come from.



Frontier will be running a multiplayer beta closer to launch.

crash down on the battlefield on bolts of lightning. "They're basically the souls of ancient heroes that have been gathered up by the God King Sigmar and reformed, quite literally, into the spearhead of his army," says Sammarco. "Each Stormcast Eternal is encased in this magical armour, and has Herculean strength."

In combat terms, they're *Realms of Ruin's* most elite army. "They're very tough, quite expensive. You don't get many Stormcast Eternals in each squad. But they've got staying power," says Sammarco. "And importantly, they're a little bit of a jack-of-all-trades, and they've got a broad range of equipment and weapons and squad types. So they do have the tools to counter pretty much any threat, whether it's mobility, or they need some artillery, or assault

troops. But they don't super excel at any one thing. They're a classic army of combined forces."

Those forces include the huge and hulking, hammer-wielding Annihilators; dragon-riding Stormdrake Guard; and lightning-charged battle-wizard Evocators. Even their most basic troops, the Liberators, are eight-feet tall and clad head to toe in golden armour – this is an intimidating force.

The Kruleboyz, their hated foe, couldn't be more different – though they're just as fearsome. They're Orruks (Age of Sigmar's version of orks) and a particularly vicious and tricky variant of the usually strong and bestial creatures. "They've learned to survive in these miasmal swamps and feted fenlands, where you're just as likely to be sucked in

and swallowed up by quicksand and murk than to have to fight anyone," says Sammarco. "And they've realised that it's not just brute strength that you need to stay alive, it's cunning." That translates to a playstyle based on both horde tactics and some sleight of hand. "They're all about tricks, traps, not being where you expect them to be," says Sammarco. "And their front-line troops, initially they tend to be a little bit more throwaway, because being evil creatures they really have no respect for life, including their own troops. But they're backed up by some fairly large, powerful monsters, as the game progresses."

The misshapen, green creatures combine elements of Lord of the Ring's monstrous orcs with an almost dark fairy-tale feel. Boltboyz heft huge, terrifying crossbows in their gangly arms; Swampcalla Shamans shuffle hunchbacked into battle, summoning up toxic sorcery; and enormous Sloggoths drag themselves into battle on all-fours with howdahs full of screeching Grots on their backs.

WARTHUNDER

All of this draws directly on the Age of Sigmar wargame. "Authenticity is



COVER FEATURE

Warhammer Age of Sigmar: Realms of Ruin

» one of the core pillars for *Realms of Ruin*,” says Sammarco – authenticity to the world Games Workshop has created, the miniatures that go with it, and, though it’s far from a direct adaptation, the tabletop wargame itself too.

“As a fan myself, what I would not want to see is a game where at face value it looks like the tabletop game, but then everything’s different because we wanted to do our own thing,” says Sammarco. “We want to make a fantastic real-time strategy game, but what we really want is for the players that love the universe already, we want them to say, ‘Oh God yeah, that’s exactly how a Liberator marches into battle! And these are the things that a Gutrippa would say!’”

“Everything we do, we’re always trying to look at the Age of Sigmar rules and lore, and say, ‘Is this matching up? Are we doing the world justice?’ Because that’s why we’re working with Games Workshop, so that we can realise their fantastic miniatures in a game. So you don’t have to look at a miniature and imagine how they would fight and talk, you see it on the screen.”

As an Age of Sigmar fan myself, what I’m shown absolutely hits that mark. From the heavy, purposeful marching of the Stormcast Eternals, to the sinister snarls of the Kruleboyz, it all feels like the wargame coming to life.

STORM CHASERS

But of course, Frontier can’t count on every player already having that affection for Age of Sigmar – I’d bet the majority of PC gamers, even those who like Warhammer, probably don’t know much about it.



Introducing such a dense new setting to people is no small challenge. How does a developer even approach that?

“Well, first of all, we’re rolling headlong into it. We’re not shying away from it. It’s important that it is a new world,” says Sammarco. “But we make sure that we’re using themes in the campaign that are very familiar, that you don’t need prior knowledge for.”

That campaign is a full singleplayer experience in a familiar RTS style, taking you through a series of missions that put you in the shoes of different characters and factions to

get different perspectives on its story.

“We use the lore – the campaign, it’s set around the trials and tribulations of the defenders of a Dawnbringer Crusade,” says Sammarco. “I would imagine most people would say, ‘What is a Dawnbringer Crusade?’ So we explain it very succinctly, but we don’t dwell on it, because what everyone can understand is the obvious things, like we’re trying to defend something and there’s a horrible larger force attacking it – that’s really easy to get behind!”

But despite clear and simple

TOP: The dev team took a trip to GW HQ in Nottingham. “There was much buying of miniatures!”

HAMMER TIME *The best Warhammer games you can buy right now*



TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

This trilogy is about as loving and authentic a tribute as the original Warhammer Fantasy setting could receive – as well as some of the most expansive and rich grand strategy you can play on PC today.



WARHAMMER 40,000: MECHANICUS

This XCOM-like, about cyborg weirdos excavating an alien tomb, features both compelling turn-based combat and the best writing of any Warhammer game.



WARHAMMER: VERMINTIDE 2

Grab a sword and join three friends for co-op action at the end of the world. Few games nail Warhammer’s dark sense of humour as well, and its fast-paced melee combat is a blast.



WARHAMMER 40,000: CHAOS GATE - DAEMONHUNTERS

Chaos Gate’s turn-based clash of Grey Knights and Nurgle cultists feels authentic – hopefully a good sign for *Realms of Ruin*.

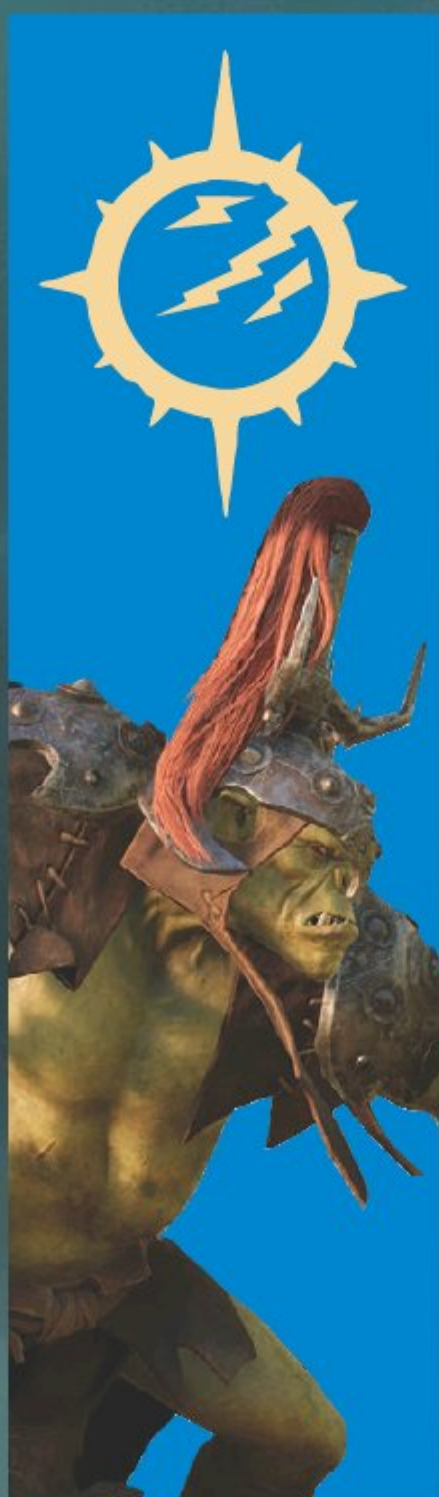
ABOVE: It’s so authentic to the wargame that even those trees in the background are taken from a real terrain kit.



AFTER LYING FALLOW FOR YEARS, REAL-TIME STRATEGY SEEMS TO BE HAVING A COMEBACK

themes, the story sounds far from shallow. As we chat, Sammarco's passion for the narrative the game is telling constantly shines through – a “character-driven” story that’s “not just about violence for the sake of violence”. It’s co-written by Gav Thorpe, a veteran writer and tabletop game designer with such a long and storied history at Games Workshop that I remember him already being a big deal back when I was a wide-eyed youth buying my first plastic lizardmen.

“We want you to care about the characters,” says Sammarco. “We put a lot of time and effort into making them plausible and believable – and obviously cool as well! So it’s a proper high quality and full cinematic experience.”



WINDS OF CHANGE

That’s another key pillar for the whole project – the idea that this is a huge, high-production value, AAA gaming experience. If Frontier can pull that off, it’ll not only be the first big flagship game for the Age of Sigmar setting, it’ll be a major event for the modern RTS revival. After lying fallow for years, real-time strategy seems to be having a comeback, but major releases from well-established studios are still more the exception than the norm – and for fans nostalgic for the ambitious, story-driven RTS campaigns of old, this could be a breath of fresh air.

“I don’t subscribe to the theory that the RTS genre died,” says Sammarco. “It never died for me! All I got was a little bit upset that at some point there weren’t as many of

them. But I think we’re just one of several companies now that are... realising that there’s a large underserved community that enjoy these kinds of games... It’s all to the power of this type of game that I still believe, and Frontier still believes, is cool and there is a market for it.

“So we just wanna be in there, in that mix, going, you know, look at this, what we’re bringing to the table is really super high production values and a great level of accessibility without getting rid of the depth.”

It’s an ambitious goal – making a great modern RTS is hard enough, let alone also trying to introduce the Age of Sigmar world and please its existing fans as well. But a grand plan suits such a grand setting, and if Frontier succeeds, it could kick off a new era of *Warhammer* games. ■

THE HISTORY OF STAR WARS GAMES

The unstoppable sci-fi franchise has spawned a legion of interactive experiences, including some of the PC's most important games

By Rick Lane



tar Wars may have started its journey in cinemas, but you can make the case that its best experiences are in videogames. The Star Wars universe lends itself well to an interactive medium. Jedi, bounty hunters and rebel spies make ideal videogame avatars, while the universe's rich library of spacecraft

laid the foundation for some of the best space combat on the PC.

Today, there are more good *Star Wars* games than good *Star Wars* films, and the best *Star Wars* games rival the original trilogy in their ability to tell exciting stories. Here, we'll chart the galaxy of adventures *Star Wars* has brought to the PC, from the first time we climbed into the cockpit of an X-Wing, to the more turbulent modern era of *Star Wars* gaming. >>



The History of Star Wars Games



JUMP TO HYPERSPACE

Star Wars games existed before modern DOS and Windows PCs, but these were mostly arcade tie-ins later ported to platforms like the Atari 2600 and the ZX Spectrum. The first notable *Star Wars* PC game is 1993's *X-Wing*, the space combat simulator that let players take the fight to the Galactic Empire in a variety of iconic rebel spacecraft. *X-Wing*'s rich combat simulation, including the distinctive power-shifting mechanic that let players prioritise different ship systems, laid the foundation for Totally Games' (mostly) great series of space combat games.

Totally Games followed up *X-Wing* with one of the greatest PC games of all time, 1994's *TIE Fighter*. Switching perspective to the Imperial faction made for a more distinctive experience, and Totally Games capitalised on this with smartly crafted missions that saw players rising through the Imperial ranks, and fighting not just rebel scum, but general criminals and traitors to the Empire. Three years later came 1997's *X-Wing versus TIE Fighter*, the

weakest entry in the series, although this multiplayer-focused game was later improved with a story-driven expansion named *Balance of Power*.

Totally Games capped off the series with 1999's *X-Wing Alliance*. Unlike the previous game, *Alliance* had a proper story from the off, and added in features such as multi-crew ships like the Millennium Falcon, and multi-stage objectives including mid-mission hyperspace jumps.

Alliance is also the best-supported of the four games today, with a thriving mod community that has even spawned a total conversion of *TIE Fighter*'s campaign within *Alliance*'s engine.

This era also saw LucasArts develop its own vehicle-centric *Star Wars* game, the notorious *Rebel Assault*. Unlike *X-Wing*, *Rebel Assault* and its sequel were essentially rail shooters. This facilitated unprecedented visual fidelity for the time, but also limited the games mechanically. The original *Rebel Assault* is also infamous for its difficulty. If you made it past the initial canyon level in this game, give yourself a pat on the back.

TOTALLY GAMES CAPPED OFF THE SERIES WITH 1999'S X-WING ALLIANCE



1 *TIE Fighter* isn't just a great *Star Wars* game, it's a PC gaming classic.

2 *Jedi Outcast*'s lightsaber combat remains undefeated (except, perhaps, for *Jedi Academy*).

3 *Empire at War* is the only great *Star Wars* strategy game, but boy, is it great.

4 *Shadows of the Empire* has some great moments, but emerged a little too early for what it was trying to do.

5 In creating *Rogue Squadron*, Factor 5 took the right lessons from *Shadows of the Empire*.

6 Why is tripping up an AT-AT such an appealing *Star Wars* fantasy?

ELEGANT WEAPONS

Charting the story of Imperial pilot turned Jedi Master Kyle Katarn, *Jedi Knight* is the most consistently excellent *Star Wars* videogame series. Katarn's story kicked off in 1995's *Dark Forces*, as a recent convert to the rebel cause dispatched to the follow the trail of a deadly new Imperial weapon known as the Dark Trooper. While it resembled a *Doom* clone, *Dark Forces* distinguished itself with its vertiginous level design and more story-driven scenarios, which take Katarn from secret bases to the underbelly of Nar Shaddaa.

LucasArts continued Katarn's story in 1997's *Jedi Knight: Dark Forces 2*, which remains one of the most technically ambitious games of its era. Not only does the game feature huge 3D levels, the addition of Force powers and a functioning lightsaber to Katarn's skillset make it more mechanically involved than any other shooter at the time.

After *Dark Forces 2*, LucasArts handed the series off to Raven Software, resulting in 2002's *Jedi Outcast* and 2003's *Jedi Academy*. Compared to LucasArts' work, Raven's games were merely decent shooters, but they compensated for this with the best representation of lightsaber combat ever committed to code. The lightsaber duels of



Outcast and *Academy* are beautiful, free-flowing ballets, and nobody, not even Respawn Entertainment, has done it better since.

SHADOWS AND ROGUES

The mid-1990s brought with it a spate of multimedia Star Wars projects, which videogames were wrangled into with mixed success. The first of these projects was *Shadows of the Empire*. Developed by Factor5, *SoTE* sees protagonist Dash Rendar travelling across the galaxy as

he hunts down the Black Sun crime boss Xizor. *SoTE* was an incredibly ambitious 3D game for its time, and was notable for its impressive replication of the Battle of Hoth. But in general play, its shooting pales in comparison to *Dark Forces 2*, which would release just ten months later.

More successful was 1998's *Rogue Squadron*. Unlike *SoTE*, *Rogue Squadron* wasn't conceived as a multimedia project, instead being merely inspired by Michael Stackpole's novel series. But the

project allowed Factor5 to take the vehicle mechanics it had built for *SoTE*'s Battle of Hoth and create an entire game around it. The result was a fantastic action-based counterpart to Totally Games' more simulationist *X-Wing* series. Factor 5 released a sequel three years later, but it never came to PC.

GALACTIC CONQUEST

Space-sim nerds and FPS fans have been well served by Star Wars, but the same can't be said for strategy buffs. The earliest attempt at a more cerebral Star Wars experience was 1998's *Star Wars: Rebellion*, which let players control either the Rebels or the Empire as players vied for dominance over 200 worlds. With its open-ended strategy sandbox, *Rebellion* was ahead of its time. But its ambition was undermined by achingly tedious micromanagement.

Two years after *Rebellion* came *Star Wars: Force Commander*, a deeply mediocre attempt to fit Star Wars into the RTS mould. *Force Commander* suffered from glacial pacing, a poor control scheme and visuals that stripped Star Wars of its grandeur. Indeed, *Force Commander* was so bad that it was swiftly bettered by 2002's *Star Wars: Galactic Battlegrounds*, which offered a passable RTS experience despite

SUDDENLY SILENCED

The best game ideas that got sent to the garbage compactor



STAR WARS: 1313

By far the most famous cancelled Star Wars game – 1313 would have seen players exploring the subterranean slums of Coruscant as a young Boba Fett in a game that was heavily inspired by *Uncharted*. 1313 was killed when Disney acquired Star Wars and shut down LucasArts.



BATTLE OF THE SITH LORDS

This gritty action game would have seen players assume the role of a descendent of Darth Maul embroiled in a Sith civil war. The game's lightsaber combat would have combined mechanics from *The Force Unleashed* and *Batman: Arkham Asylum*. Like 1313, it was cancelled.



PROJECT RAGTAG

Project Ragtag was conceived as a Star Wars heist adventure inspired by *Oceans Eleven*. Mechanically it would have resembled *Uncharted*, but with the ability to play as multiple characters, and deceive/distract NPC characters. The project was brought down by technical issues.

The History of Star Wars Games



➤ being an *Age of Empires* clone so thinly veiled you could practically see the spears poking out.

There is one glittering diamond amid this murky asteroid field, however, 2006's *Star Wars: Empire at War*. Petroglyph's title successfully melds the spectacle you'd expect from a *Star Wars* game with a rich strategy sandbox that truly put players in command of a galactic military force. Playing as either the Rebels or the Imperials, *Empire at War* let players wrest control of the galaxy planet by planet by fielding fleets and armies that engaged in real-time, 3D battles. Like *X-Wing Alliance*, *Empire at War* has been kept relevant by a bustling modding community, but if any ageing *Star Wars* game deserves a modern HD sequel, Petroglyph's strategy is it.

UNEQUAL PREQUELS

Star Wars' reputation came crashing down in 1999, as the contemptible prequel films slopped across cinemas worldwide. And don't try to argue these films have redeeming qualities just because you didn't like *The Last Jedi*. Rian Johnson's film may be uneven, but the prequels are unambiguously Bantha poodoo.

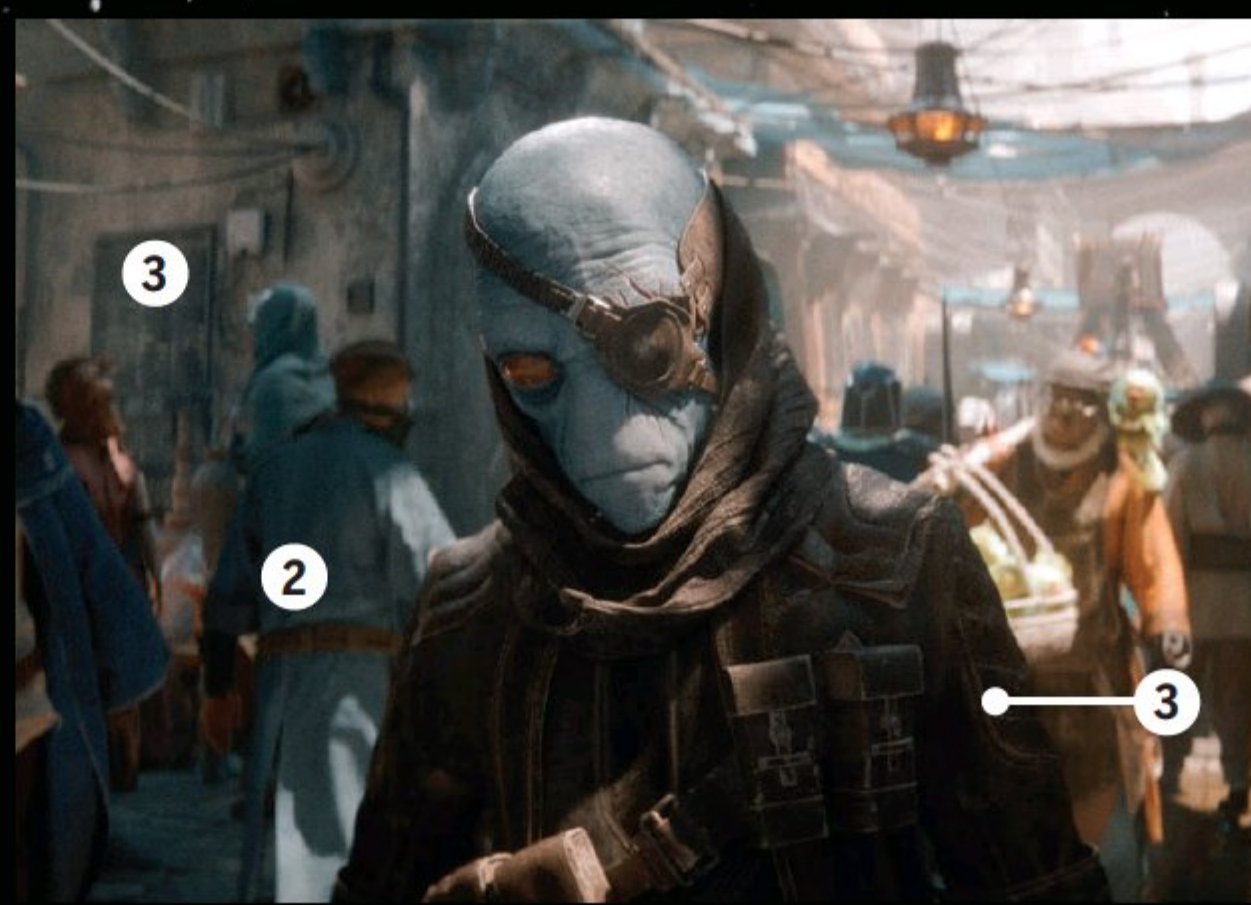
Yet this isn't true for the games that followed in the prequel trilogy's wake. Sure, the *Phantom Menace*

videogame tie-in is as miserable as the film itself, but released on the same day (May 18, 1999) was *Star Wars: Episode 1: Racer*. One of the most unusual *Star Wars* videogames, *Episode 1: Racer* took the best part of George Lucas' nonsensical CGI-fest and built a perfectly enjoyable *WipeOut* clone around it. Alongside its planet-hopping racetracks and fast-paced play, *Racer* employed a clever risk/reward mechanic whereby boosting your pod's speed caused its temperature to rise, which at extreme levels could make your engines explode.

As well as spawning three utterly shit films, the prequel era brought an end to the PC's role as the leading platform for *Star Wars* games, with prequel titles like *Obi Wan* and *Jedi Starfighter* being exclusive to consoles such as Xbox and PlayStation 2 (although in some cases, this was actually a mercy). Nonetheless, PC gamers did get to play the best prequel-era game with the thoroughly excellent *Star Wars: Republic Commando*. This squad-based shooter put players in command of a characterful group of prototypical Stormtroopers as they travelled the

STAR WARS ECLIPSE

What do we know about it right now?



1 NPC GARB

Eclipse takes place 200 years before *The Phantom Menace*, at a time of renaissance for the High Republic.

2 BACKGROUND BUILDING

Part of *Eclipse* takes place in the Outer Rim, and this looks like a market you'd see on an Outer Rim planet.

3 SHIFTY ALIEN

We don't know who this shifty-looking Duros is yet, but we do know that Yoda and the Jedi Order feature in *Eclipse*.



galaxy dishing out Republican justice wherever they went.

After *Revenge of the Sith*, mainline Star Wars gaming entered a quieter phase. The main event between 2005 and 2010 was *The Force Unleashed*. LucasArts' last hurrah in the Star Wars universe straddled the line between the prequels and the modern era. *TFU* deserves credit for its technical ambition, but the resulting game was a decidedly mixed affair.

KNIGHTS' TALES

The prequel era was generally a rotten time to be a Star Wars fan, but this period also saw Star Wars gaming reach its zenith. In 2003, BioWare released *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, a fully-fledged RPG safely ensconced in the past of the Star Wars universe, thousands of years before Jar Jar Binks.

More importantly, placing its game outside of established canon allowed BioWare much greater creative freedom, resulting in what might just be the best story told inside George Lucas' universe. Putting players in the role of an amnesiac force-sensitive, *Knights of the Old Republic* saw players travelling across the galaxy on the trail of the Star Forge, while trying to avoid the clutches of the Sith



1 *Episode 1: Racer* is one of the few good things to emerge from the prequels.

2 *Republic Commando* is the other good thing to emerge from the prequels.

3 *Knights of the Old Republic*: the best Star Wars story?

4 *The Old Republic* contains a wealth of Star Wars tales.

5 *Lego Star Wars* is, weirdly, the best Star Wars game based directly on the films.

6 It's also the best way to experience this dreck.

Lord Darth Malik, and unravel the mystery behind his missing master, Darth Revan.

A sequel, developed by Obsidian, took a darker, more ambiguous view of Jedi and the Force. Indeed, *The Sith Lords* would probably be better regarded than the original, had Obsidian been allowed to finish it. Nonetheless, *Knights of the Old Republic* represented the pinnacle of Star Wars gaming, and had significant influence on more general RPG design. Its structure, dialogue systems and storytelling would form the basis of BioWare's later 3D RPGs *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*, and this framework has been borrowed by countless other RPGs and open-world games in the years since.

SELL BLOCK 1138

It is profoundly odd that the best virtual representation of the canonical Star Wars story is a bunch of spoof games based around a children's construction toy. But would you have it any other way? Developed by Traveller's Tales, 2005's *Lego Star Wars* vastly

improved the prequel trilogy by treating the whole thing as a joke (and also breaking down the trilogy's stilted political drama into fun interactive sequences). Traveller's Tales followed this up two years later with an equally entertaining romp through the original trilogy, now playable together as *Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga*.

After the second *Lego Star Wars*, TT's Lego games grew substantially in ambition.

Centred around the Clone Wars, *Lego Star Wars III* was a much more comprehensive game, with an open-ended mission structure,

colossal 3D battles, and more nuanced vehicle controls. Last year's *Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga* expanded that vision even further, with a semi-persistent galaxy that let players fly between planets as they explore the plots of all nine mainline Star Wars films.

These later games are impressive constructions, but they have lost some of the charming simplicity of the first two games. Then again, it wouldn't be the first time Star Wars has suffered from that problem.



The History of Star Wars Games



WEESA GOING HOME

Every Star Wars fan has dreamed about what it might be like to live inside George Lucas' universe. In 2003, that dream almost came true. LucasArts and Verant Interactive released *Star Wars: Galaxies*, a Star Wars MMO that promised players the opportunity to carve their own path through a galaxy far, far away. Players could be bounty hunters, moisture farmers, creature tamers, cantina owners, smugglers, rebel spies, imperial commandos... These roles would all contribute to a dynamic ecosystem featuring a player-driven economy, player-created missions and player-run cities with player-elected mayors.

Galaxies was a visionary design, and remains so to this day. Unfortunately, this design had significant teething problems, and Verant's attempts to solve them, such as the infamous New Game Enhancements designed to make becoming a Jedi easier, caused more problems than they solved. Despite admirable support in the form of expansions like *Jump to*

Lightspeed, *Galaxies* never reached its true potential, and the MMO shut down in 2011.

This wasn't the end for the alluring prospect of a Star Wars MMO. That same year saw the launch of BioWare's *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, which took the fundamental ideas of the *KotOR* RPGs and blew them out to MMO scope. While far less mechanically ambitious than *Galaxies*, *The Old Republic*

compensated for this by giving player classes highly story-driven campaigns each pulling them down the path of a Jedi or a bounty hunter or a

smuggler. These stories were cinematically told and featured NPC companions who followed you on your journey. *The Old Republic* was significantly more successful than *Galaxies*, and continues to run as a free-to-play title.

THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE

Developed by Pandemic Studios, *Star Wars: Battlefront* took the large-scale, team-based multiplayer battles pioneered by *Battlefield 1942* and wrapped them in glossy Star Wars

FALLEN ORDER HAD ITS HEART IN THE RIGHT PLACE



1 *The Old Republic* is great, but what I wouldn't give for a proper *KotOR 3*.

2 If Respawn has its way, *Empire at War* may not be the only good Star Wars RTS for much longer.

3 *Battlefront 2* was a decent game, lootbox fiasco aside.

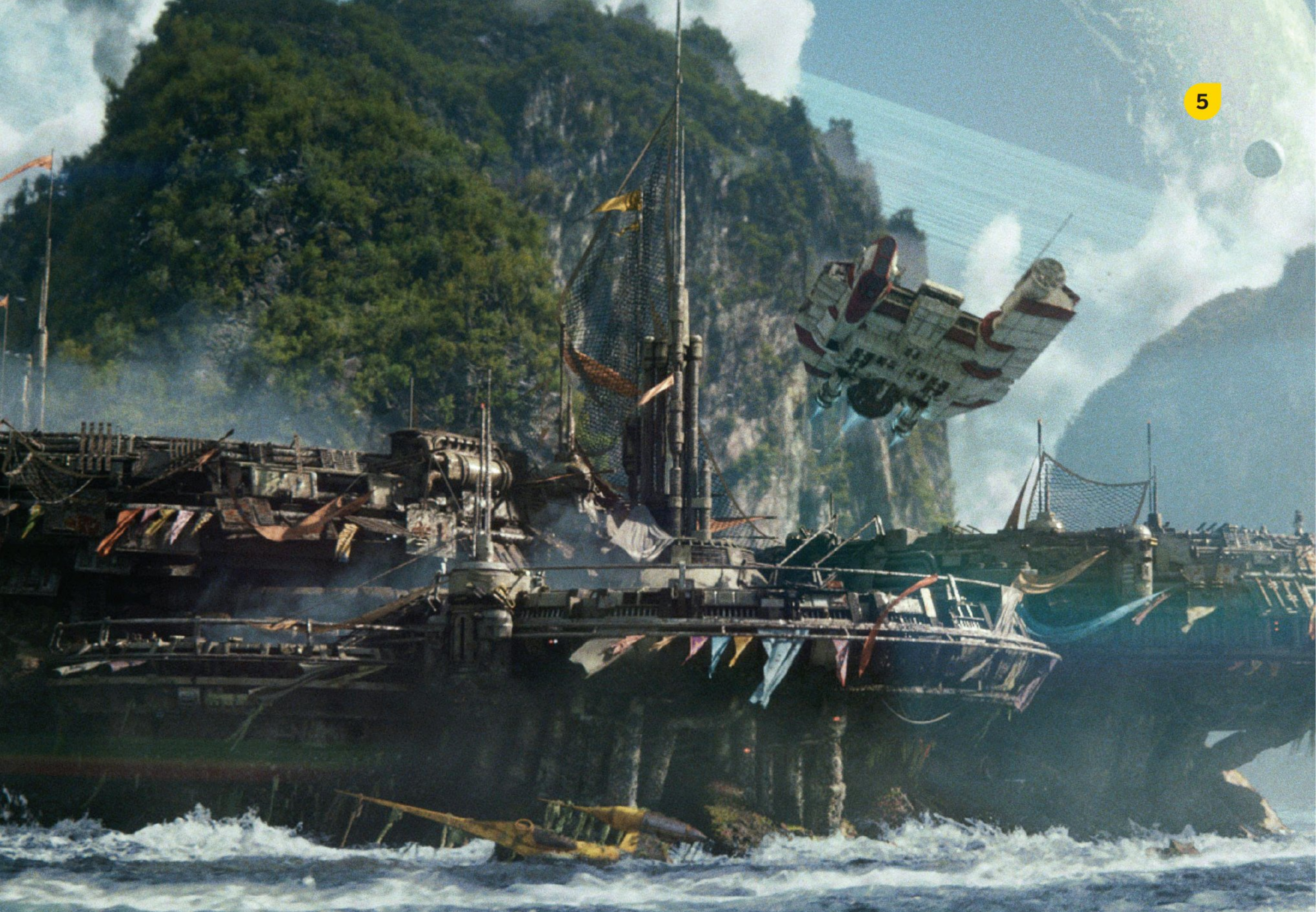
4 Can EA stick the landing with *Jedi Survivor*?

5 Quantic Dream's *Star Wars: Eclipse* may be a much broader game than what the studio is known for.

packaging. While the original made a decent stab at the idea, it was the sequel, released just a year later, that fired it into the next star system. Alongside the large scale battles between Rebels and Imperials, Republicans and Separatists, *Battlefront 2* expanded the front lines into space, and let players take to the field as powerful Jedi. The sequel also introduced the Galactic Conquest mode, combining the 3D battles with a Risk-style campaign map in a way that made the singleplayer much more replayable.

Plans for a third *Battlefront* game developed by Free Radical Design never came to fruition, but the series was picked up by EA when the publisher snatched the Star Wars licence in 2013. EA handed development duties to *Battlefield* developer DICE, a brilliant idea in theory, but DICE's approach yielded mixed results. 2014's *Battlefront* reboot certainly looked the part, but the game itself was disappointingly thin, with lightweight shooting, superfluous vehicles and a general lack of substance.

2017's *Battlefront 2* was a much better offering. Combat was improved, vehicles were more fun, the game included space battles, and it even had a singleplayer campaign. But the game's reputation was



forever tarnished by EA's atrocious implementation of loot-boxes, undermining what might otherwise be the best *Battlefront* of them all.

A GALAXY FOR EA

The last decade of Star Wars games has been almost exclusively presided over by Electronic Arts. The result of this hasn't exactly been great. In ten years, EA has published five mainline *Star Wars* games, the quality of which has been highly inconsistent.

I've already discussed the merits and flaws of EA's two *Battlefront* games. But in 2019, Respawn added *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* to the meagre pile. *Fallen Order* had its heart in the right place, but the game's quality varied substantially moment to moment. At its best, it's a spectacular Star Wars adventure that has you dashing through vast shipbreaking yards and climbing the back of an AT-AT. At its worst, it has trudging through planets that look half-finished, using your lightsaber to chop up generic alien bugs.

Twelve months after *Fallen Order*, EA published *Star Wars: Squadrons*, a loving homage to the space combat sims of yore. *Squadrons* is probably the best Star Wars game EA produced, a canny blend of *X-Wing*'s simulation and

Rogue Squadron's arcade combat, with an imaginative campaign that sees players hopping between the Rebels and the Empire, and VR functionality that lets players experience the scale of a Star Wars space battle like never before. Sadly, EA sent the game out to die, offering no long-term support for its (well-designed) multiplayer.

A LONG TIME AHEAD

EA's exclusivity deal with Disney expires this year. But like a mediocre life-partner realising they're about to

get dumped, the company has seemingly regained an interest in making *Star Wars* games, with CEO Andrew Wilson expressing a desire to "double down" on the partnership with Disney. Certainly, EA has more Star Wars games in the pipeline. Alongside the recently released *Jedi: Survivor*, Respawn Entertainment is making both a Star Wars FPS and a Star Wars strategy game, although there's little information about either.

From Disney's perspective, its relationship with EA is now an open one. Anyone who wants to make a Star Wars game can pitch it to the newly revived LucasFilm Games. Already, this has spawned a bunch of projects including Quantic Dream's *Star Wars: Eclipse*, which will presumably be narrative focussed like the firm's previous titles. Also in production is an open-world Star Wars game from Ubisoft, a (reportedly troubled) remake of *Knights of the Old Republic* from Aspyr. Finally, after a literal decade of trying (see boxout) Amy Hennig's long-in-development Star Wars project might see the light of day.

Many of these projects won't launch until 2025, meaning Star Wars fans could be in for a fallow few years. But the long-term future of Star Wars gaming is looking brighter than it has in years. ■

EYE-ON CANON

After Disney purchased Star Wars, the series' timeline was completely rearranged



JEDI KNIGHT

The *Jedi Knight* series is not canon, meaning Kyle Katarn did not in fact steal the Death Star plans. Weirdly, Dark Troopers were reintroduced into canon in *The Mandalorian*.



KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

Darth Revan was re-established into the canon in *The Rise of Skywalker* as the namesake of the Sith Eternal Army's 3rd Legion. What this means for *KoTOR* in general is unclear.



THE FORCE UNLEASHED

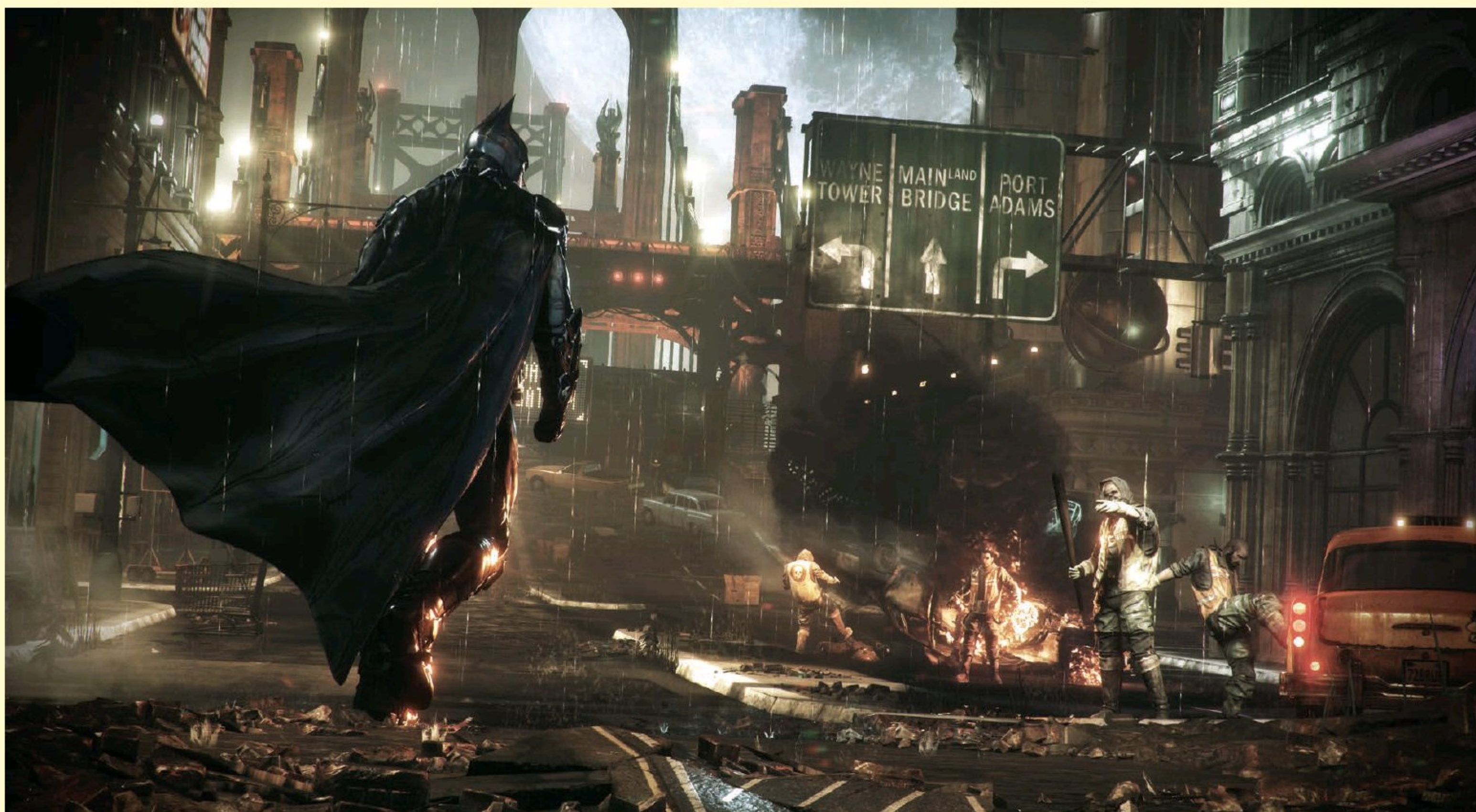
Starkiller, Vader's apprentice who turned to the light, was supposedly instrumental in the founding of the Rebel Alliance. But Disney explored this with *Andor*.

A composite image featuring Batman in his suit with wings spread, flying over a dark, rainy Gotham City street. In the background, there are burning cars, police officers, and a 'GOTHAM' sign. A speed limit sign for 30 is also visible. The bottom of the image shows the front of the Batmobile driving through water.

THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL GAMES ON PC

From trainwreck ports and
moral panics to lootbox disasters

By Robin Valentine



Batman: Arkham Knight

RELEASED June 23, 2015 | DEVELOPER Rocksteady Studios | PUBLISHER Warner Bros

How broken does a port have to be to get pulled off sale entirely? In June 2015 we found out, with the average PC player experiencing the

shadowy streets of Gotham at about 10fps – if they could run the game at all. At the time, we advised readers to “treat *Arkham Knight* as a game still in development”.

Just a day after launch, sales were suspended, retail stock was recalled, and refunds were offered to anyone who wanted one. It didn't return to sale until several patches later

in October 2015, though it still had plenty of issues, and in the end Warner Bros was so keen to apologise to PC players that they gave *Arkham Knight* owners all the previous *Arkham* games for free as a peace offering. Ultimately, its technical woes overshadowed the game.

Doom

RELEASED December 10, 1993 | DEVELOPER iD Software | PUBLISHER In-house

It's easy to forget, but on release *Doom's* gory combat and demonic themes kicked up a storm of controversy, one of the earliest moral panics about violent games. Things got really ugly when it was linked to the Columbine school shooting – the perpetrators were fans of the game, and one mentioned in his journal that he imagined the planned massacre would be like playing it. The resulting media coverage essentially set the template for games being linked to real-world violence.



Resident Evil 5

RELEASED September 18, 2009 | DEVELOPER Capcom | PUBLISHER In-house

At launch, this action-packed zombie shooter was criticised by many for being too great a departure from the series' survival horror roots – but Capcom probably would've been quite happy if that had been the only controversy around it. Instead, it spent much of its preview period and launch window defending against accusations of racism, due to its questionable depiction of its African setting, and rather a lot of sequences in which a handsome white man blasts hordes of black people to bits (even if they were, of course, undead). That didn't stop it being a smash success, though.



**THE REACTION FROM FANS WAS SO
OVERWHELMINGLY NEGATIVE**

Mass Effect 3

RELEASED March 6, 2012 | DEVELOPER BioWare | PUBLISHER Electronic Arts

The final entry in BioWare's sci-fi trilogy had a daunting task: not only creating a satisfying ending to Commander Shepard's story, but also honouring all the choices players had made along the way and tying off the galaxy's many still-dangling plot threads. But even with that benefit of the doubt, *Mass Effect 3*'s story was a bit of a mess, with an exposition-spouting ghost child, bizarre revelations about the nature of main villains the Reapers, and, ultimately, an ending that pleased absolutely no one, with a seemingly momentous choice that actually just changed the colour tint of your final cutscene.

The reaction from fans was so overwhelmingly negative that something unprecedented happened: BioWare went back in and changed the ending in a patch. Along with some DLC that better explained and foreshadowed the plot's stranger twists, *Mass Effect 3*'s story was eventually 'fixed', but, more importantly, the power dynamic between developers and fans changed forever.

Daikatana

RELEASED May 22, 2000 | DEVELOPER Ion Storm | PUBLISHER Eidos Interactive

Sorry, John Romero – you've made the list twice. This follow-up to *Doom* and *Quake*, telling the tale of a time-travelling swordsmaster, went from hotly anticipated to radioactive following delays, a creaky E3 demo that struggled to hit a decent framerate, reports of a studio haemorrhaging staff and mired in dysfunction, and an ad campaign that ill-advisedly went with the slogan "John Romero's about to make you his bitch" instead of actually saying anything about the game.



Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2

RELEASED November 10, 2009 | DEVELOPER Infinity Ward | PUBLISHER Activision

The *Call of Duty* series is certainly no stranger to controversy. But certainly its biggest ever blow-up was around a *Modern Warfare 2* level named No Russian, in which the player, acting as an undercover agent, participates in a mass shooting of civilians in an airport. The sequence's brutality and echoes of real-world massacres and terrorist attacks led to condemnation in the mainstream media and even from prominent religious leaders; many international versions of the game were censored, and the entire level was removed for the Russian release.



Hogwarts Legacy

RELEASED February 10, 2023 | DEVELOPER Avalanche Software | PUBLISHER Warner Bros

Harry Potter as a franchise has been sailing in contentious waters for a while now, thanks to the increasingly active stance its creator JK Rowling has taken against trans rights, and there was no chance of *Hogwarts Legacy* escaping the controversy. Much of the game's preview period was dominated by discussion of whether buying the game would be tacit support of her views or not. It also drew criticism for its focus on the setting's goblins, seen by many as antisemitic caricatures, and the discovery in 2021 that its then lead designer had a history of expressing hateful beliefs on social media.

Devotion

RELEASED February 19, 2019 | DEVELOPER Red Candle Games | PUBLISHER In-house

This critically acclaimed Taiwanese horror game raised the ire of Chinese gamers when it was discovered that it contained an Easter egg comparing the leader of the Chinese Communist Party to Winnie the Pooh, referencing an insulting internet meme. The game's Steam page was review bombed, and though the offending image was patched out, the anger continued to burn hot enough that the game's publishers cut ties and the developer removed the game from Steam.



Star Wars Battlefront II

RELEASED November 17, 2017 | DEVELOPER DICE | PUBLISHER Electronic Arts

If anyone was going to discover the breaking point of microtransactions, it was going to be EA, and sure enough, in its pre-release beta, *Star Wars Battlefront II* boasted a progression system so warped by lootboxes and pay-to-win mechanics that it triggered not only a player revolt, but began the process

in some countries of legislating against such practices entirely. Despite being a full-priced game, it was estimated it would take someone unwilling to buy lootboxes around 40 hours of constant grinding just to unlock and play Darth Vader; EA's response on Reddit that this created "a sense of pride and accomplishment"

became the most downvoted comment in the site's history. Ultimately, with so much bad press circulating that the company's share prices dipped, even EA couldn't hold the line – the microtransactions were removed before the game even launched, and eventually the developer unlocked all of the game's characters.



The Most Controversial Games on PC

Mortal Kombat

RELEASED May 25, 1994 | DEVELOPER Midway | PUBLISHER Acclaim

If there's one thing above all else that fighting game series *Mortal Kombat* is known for, it's the gory fatalities, and when its first entry released they were considered so shocking in their violence that they set off a series of congressional hearings. In the end, the entire game industry was given an ultimatum: get your house in order within a year with a robust ratings body, or the government will do it for you. The result was the Entertainment Software Ratings Board.



Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

RELEASED June 2, 2005 | DEVELOPER Rockstar Games | PUBLISHER In-house

Controversy is pretty much the status quo for the *GTA* series – its violence and depiction of real-world crimes has kicked up outrage with almost every entry, and it was a particular target of crusading weirdo Jack Thompson. But nothing compares to the furore around *San Andreas*, and the infamous Hot Coffee incident. A sexual minigame locked off to players but left on the disc was unlocked by modders, leading to so much outcry that the game's rating was changed, copies were recalled and a lawsuit was levelled against Rockstar Games.



Cyberpunk 2077

RELEASED December 10, 2020 | DEVELOPER CD Projekt Red | PUBLISHER In-house

After the enormous success of the excellent *The Witcher 3*, CD Projekt Red was flying high. When it announced a follow-up, the hype couldn't have been higher. It would be no exaggeration to call *Cyberpunk 2077* the most anticipated game of all time, and over the course of the

eight years between announcement and release, expectations climbed higher and higher, pushed ever upwards by increasingly outlandish and ambitious promises from the developer. And then it launched.

The disastrous release of the game was a shock to the system felt across the whole industry. Not only was it

poorly optimised and riddled with crippling bugs, it simply didn't live up to the vision it had presented to the world. And with 20 million copies sold, that meant an enormous quantity of angry players voicing their unhappiness online. The developer has essentially been scrambling to 'fix' the game and repair its reputation ever since.

No Man's Sky

RELEASED Aug 12, 2016 | DEVELOPER Hello Games | PUBLISHER In-house

Some developers promise the world; Hello Games promised an entire universe, an expanse of procedurally-generated planets so vast that no one player could ever hope to see them all. Though backed in part by Sony, the studio was relatively small, but every interview and trailer only plastered on more and more layers of expectations, from unique flora and fauna on every world, to warring alien factions, to MMO-like multiplayer. Even beyond the scope of what Hello Games promised, the infinite potential of the concept took root in people's

heads and sparked their imaginations. Perhaps *No Man's Sky* could never have lived up to people's visions of what it could be, but the game that launched didn't include many of the core features discussed in previews, and was simply a far more basic and narrow experience than players hoped. Hello Games' over-enthusiastic naivety backfired to a terrifying degree, and the studio received an absolute avalanche of anger and abuse.

Whatever you think of the studio's intentions, it can't be said it didn't make good – in the years since, *No Man's Sky* has received regular updates, some even adding in those promised missing features, and though it may never be the game some imagined, it enjoys a thriving community regardless.

HELLO GAMES'
OVER-
ENTHUSIASTIC
NAIVETY
BACKFIRED



Six Days in Fallujah

RELEASED TBC | DEVELOPER Atomic Games (ex), Highwire Games | PUBLISHER Konami (ex), Victura

This first-person shooter's premise – a recreation of a bloody and itself controversial battle during the Iraq War in which the US military used white phosphorus against insurgents – has to be one of the most offensive and wrong-headed in the history of games. Originally announced only a few years after the real incident, the backlash against it was so severe that publisher Konami quickly dropped the game, and developer Atomic Games went bankrupt before it could finish it. But the controversy isn't over – Highwire Games and publisher Victura have announced the game is back in development.

Star Citizen

RELEASED TBC | DEVELOPER Cloud Imperium Games | PUBLISHER In-house

Originally announced in 2012, *Star Citizen* still has no release date in sight – even though it's now received around \$564 million in crowdfunded cash. Despite the faith still placed in it by many in its community, and some elements being made playable in an alpha state, any hope that it will ever actually come out now seems slim – which makes it rather questionable how much money it still takes from players. You can, for example, buy a Javelin ship (that doesn't exist) for \$3,600 of real money.



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

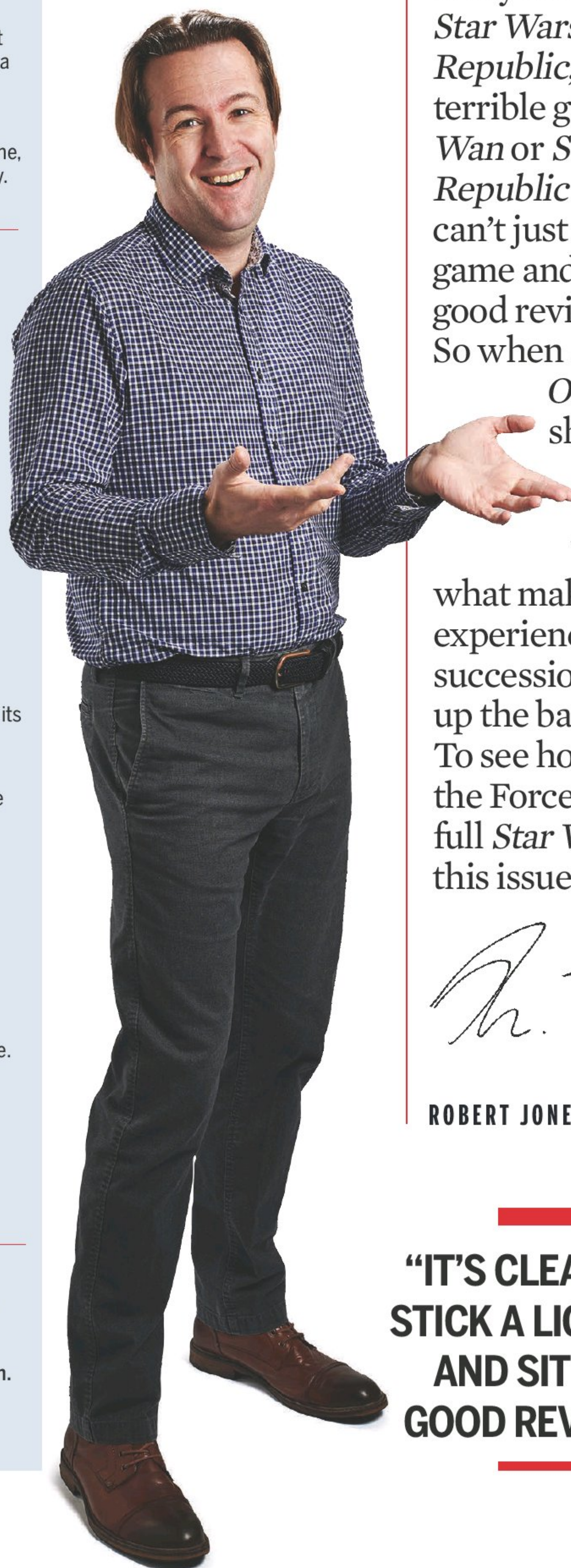
95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC PowerPlay staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.



Feel the Force

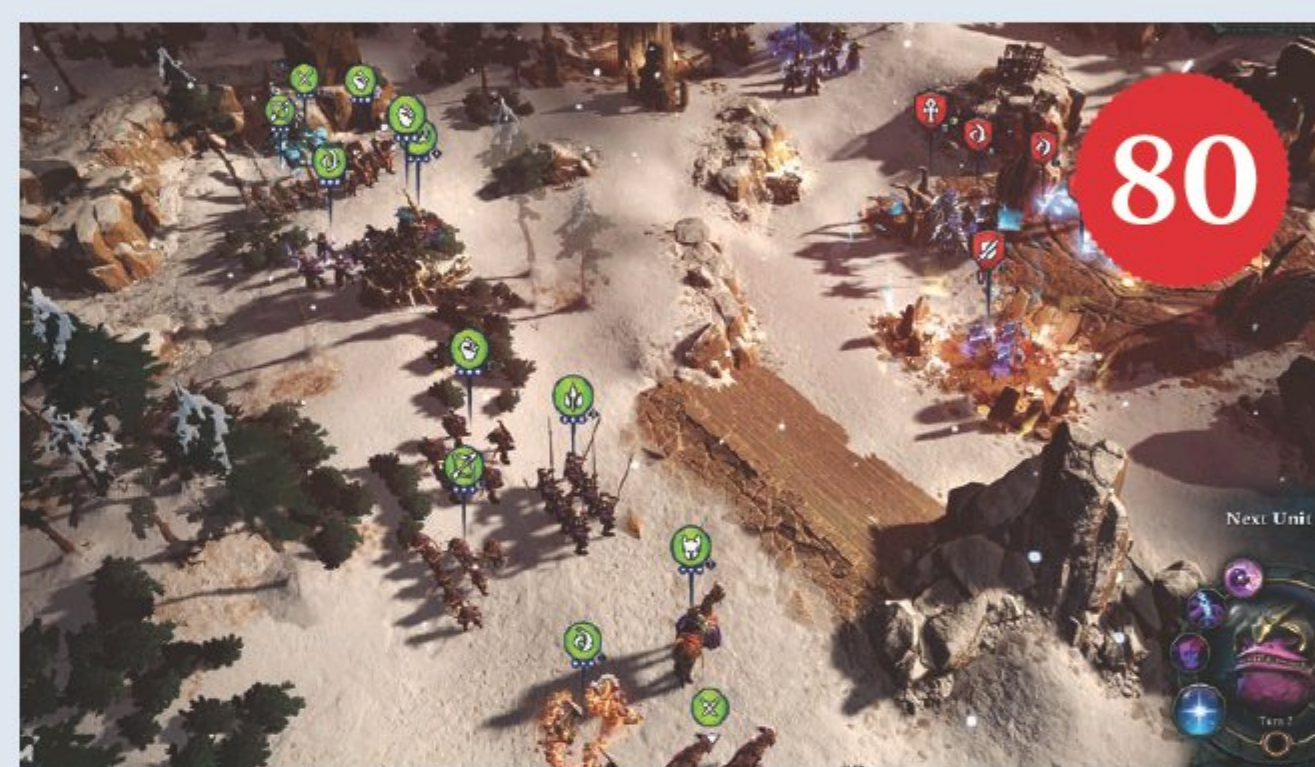
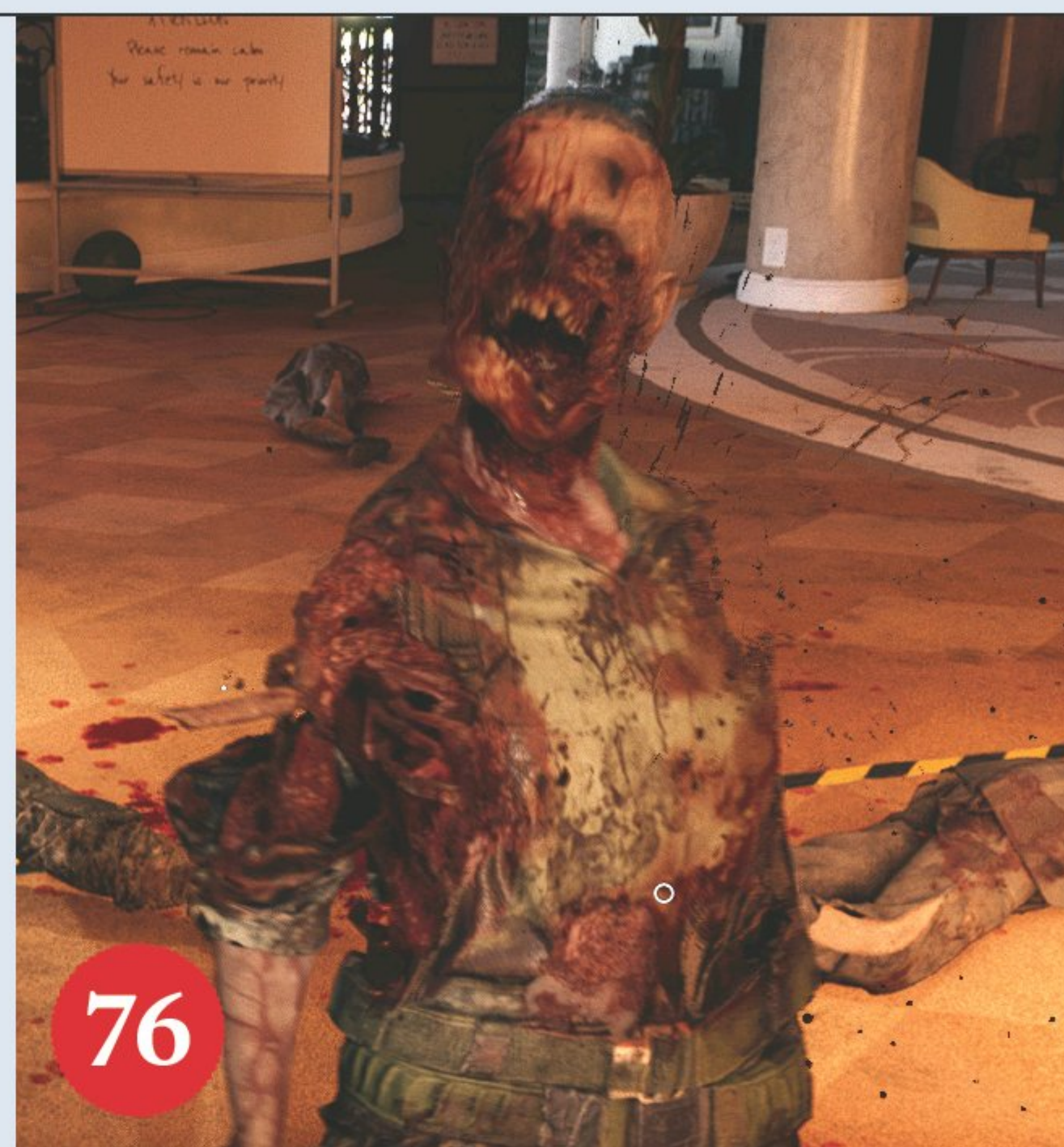
Making a good *Star Wars* game, as history has shown, isn't easy. For every *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast* or *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, there are a plethora of terrible games like *Star Wars Obi-Wan* or *Star Wars the Clone Wars: Republic Heroes*. It's clear that you can't just stick a lightsaber in your game and sit back and watch the good reviews and cash fly in.

So when *Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order* released in 2019 and showed that its maker, Respawn, had serious respect for classic *Star Wars* games as well as what makes a good gaming experience, it felt a welcome succession, with Cal Kestis picking up the baton left by Kyle Katarn. To see how Cal's adventures with the Force continue, check out our full *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor* review this issue.

R. Jones

ROBERT JONES

"IT'S CLEAR THAT YOU CAN'T JUST STICK A LIGHTSABER IN YOUR GAME AND SIT BACK AND WATCH THE GOOD REVIEWS AND CASH FLY IN."



Contents

- 56** Star Wars Jedi: Survivor
- 60** Terra Nil
- 62** The Last of Us Part 1
- 66** Ravenbound
- 70** Minecraft Legends
- 72** Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened

- 76** Dead Island 2
- 80** Age of Wonders 4
- FREE GAMES**
- 84** The Murder of Sonic the Hedgehog
- 85** Uncharted Wanders
- 85** Driftr

This month's Jar Jar Binks dodging reviewers...



MORGAN PARK
Specialist in
Midi-chlorians
Currently playing
*Star Wars Jedi:
Survivor*
This month
Drank too many Ruby
bliels, dropped his
lightsaber in the lav.



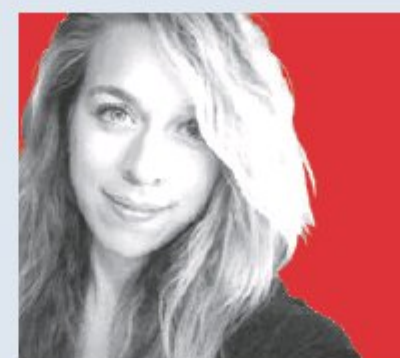
PHIL IWANIUK
Specialist in
Battling shader caches
Currently playing
The Last of Us Part 1
This month
Waited over two hours
to play *TLOU Part 1* on
PC, then really wished
he hadn't bothered.



RICK LANE
Specialist in
Cockney voiceovers
Currently playing
Ravenbound
This month
Popped into a draugr
camp for a spot of tea
and a few cucumber
sandwiches. Died.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Cake jokes
Currently playing
Portal 2
This month
Opened two linked
portals in PCG Towers,
then fell through them
both endlessly.



LAUREN MORTON
Specialist in
Tickling piglins
Currently playing
Minecraft Legends
This month
Became the ultimate
helicopter parent to
keep zigzagging
toddler warriors alive.



KESTIS RUN

STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR is a grand sequel with Souls-like action

By Morgan Park

Star Wars Jedi: Survivor is arriving at a time when there's too much Star Wars, and most of it is not good. The Mandalorian has gotten too cheesy in its third season, the Boba Fett and Obi-Wan shows were toothless side stories, and enthusiasm around the next wave of movies feels, at best, muted. Jedi: Survivor bucks this trend. It's one of the best things to happen to the series in years, and easily the best modern Star Wars game.

At a glance Jedi: Survivor seems like it falls squarely on the pulpy, safer side of Star Wars – the gifted Jedi with untapped potential, faithful droid companion, and swashbuckling crew certainly paint that picture, but there's more to Cal Kestis. Jedi: Survivor doesn't shy away from the darkest chapter of Star Wars history, but finds humour in an unfair world and sometimes succumbs to helplessness.

It's not a story about fighting the Empire as much as coping with its dominance, grappling with the futility of rebellion and questioning what's left to fight for. The modern Star Wars media that this feels closest to is Andor, though it's not as ambitious in its storytelling or as cynical. Unfortunately, those themes take a backseat through the middle of

the story while Cal Kestis and crew entertain the deranged tantrums of a skin-deep evil guy with a red lightsaber, reminding us that this is still Uncharted in space.

But man, is it damn good Uncharted. Better, in fact, because Jedi: Survivor breaks free of the Naughty Dog trends 2019's Fallen Order chased. Yes, Cal climbs up crumbling buildings and swings on ropes, but he also

double jumps, air dashes, wallruns, and grapple hooks all over the place. There's an almost equal ratio of combat to platforming, and both things are fun this time.

Jedi: Survivor revisits an era when third-person action games were designed like jungle gyms – bottomless death pits flanked by that special kind of wall you can climb on, platforms that move for no

Revisits an era when action games were designed like jungle gyms

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A third-person Star Wars adventure with Souls-like combat

EXPECT TO PAY
\$99.95

DEVELOPER
Respawn
Entertainment

PUBLISHER
Electronic Arts

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-9900KS,
32GB RAM, GeForce
RTX 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
ea.com/games/starwars/jedi/jedi-survivor

reason at all, floating balloons that slingshot you across the sky. Respawn has resurrected the big-budget 3D platformer, and it's glorious.

PLANETSIDE

Much of Jedi: Survivor's platformer spirit is felt in its hub world of Koboh, a frontier planet in the midst of a turf war between Stormtroopers and raiders wielding reprogrammed prequel droids. You might be surprised to find out that half of the game takes place on Koboh, but that's because it's packing multiple full-sized levels, sidequests, secret areas, puzzle rooms and optional boss battles. It's deep, wide, and technically an open world, but not a boundless sandbox. It's more like a collection of linear levels connected to a central area like spokes on a wheel – a PS2-style platformer without the loading screens.

The only thing Jedi: Survivor is missing are trails of floating gems or coins to draw my eye to optional areas. Instead, Respawn has made a dozen or so sidequests and bounty hunts that take you to lesser-explored corners of the map. Sometimes the quests come with a bit of story setup from a Koboh local, but they're often just a tip to go cave diving for treasure or a heads up about a nasty droid on the loose. Rewards are usually underwhelming perks like "more block meter", a new pair of trousers, or tiny health bar upgrades, but Koboh's mini dungeons and puzzles are fun enough that I sought them out constantly.

DRESS UP

I did enjoy playing dress-up with Cal, though. He has expanded his horizons beyond ponchos, and can now be fitted with any combination of shirts, jackets, pants and hairstyles. Similarly, Cal's lightsaber, blaster and BD-1 himself can be customised with lots of different parts and materials.

The details are immaculate and I'm sure a bigger Star Wars fan than I

TAKING A STANCE What your favourite combat stance says about you



SINGLE SABER

- You like to keep things simple, because who needs more than one saber?
- You really want to recreate Luke's saber down to every detail.
- You like a stance that can do a little bit of everything.



DOUBLE BLADE

- You want to kill everything Cal touches quickly.
- If the game allowed, your saber would be red in honour of Darth Maul.
- You reenacted the Kenobi/Maul duel in your backyard.



DUAL BLADE

- You just want to mash the button and blocking is for nerds.
- You're jazzed for the Ahsoka show, and probably coloured your sabers white to get in the spirit.
- Seriously, why not double your lethality?



BLASTER

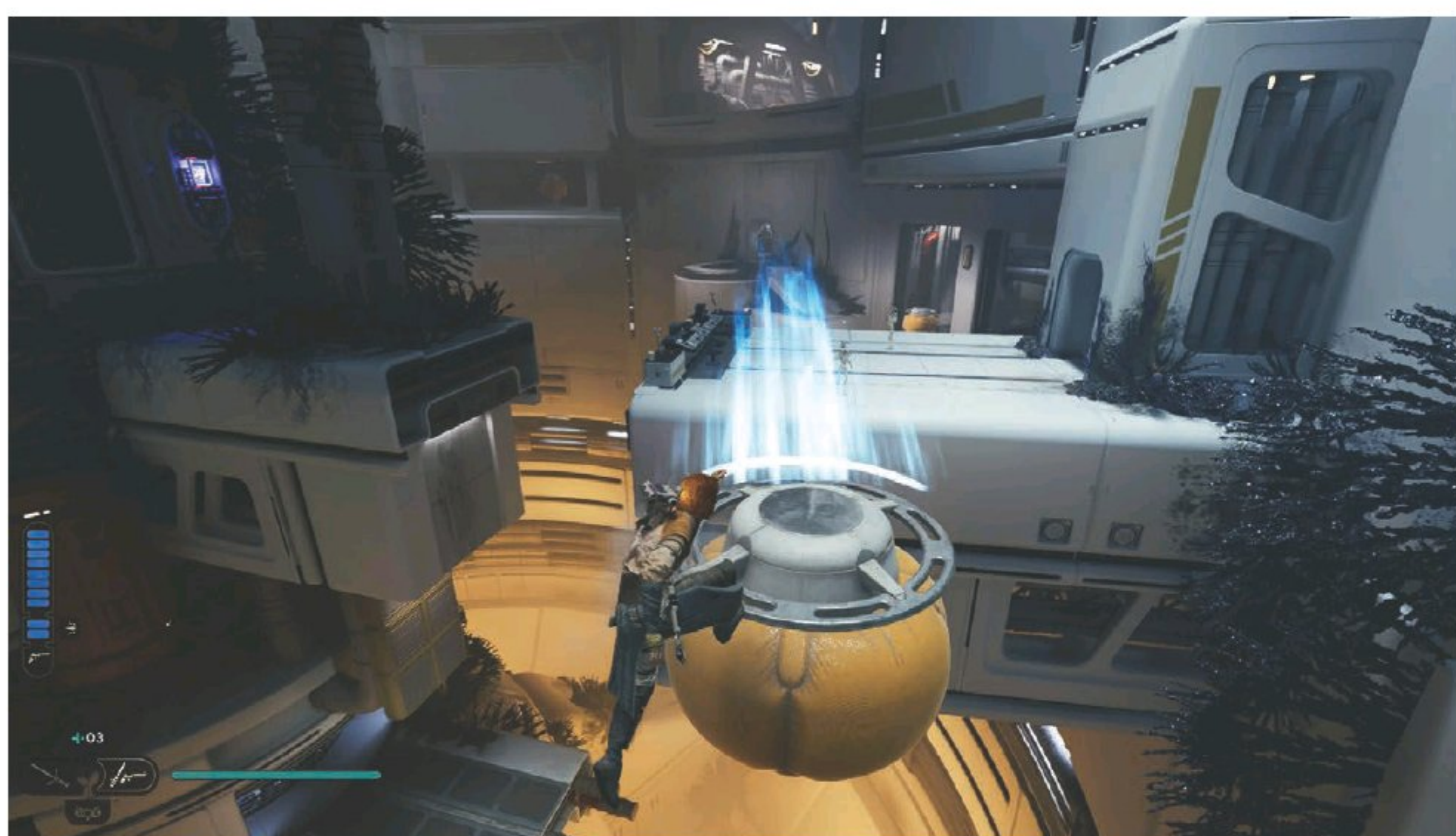
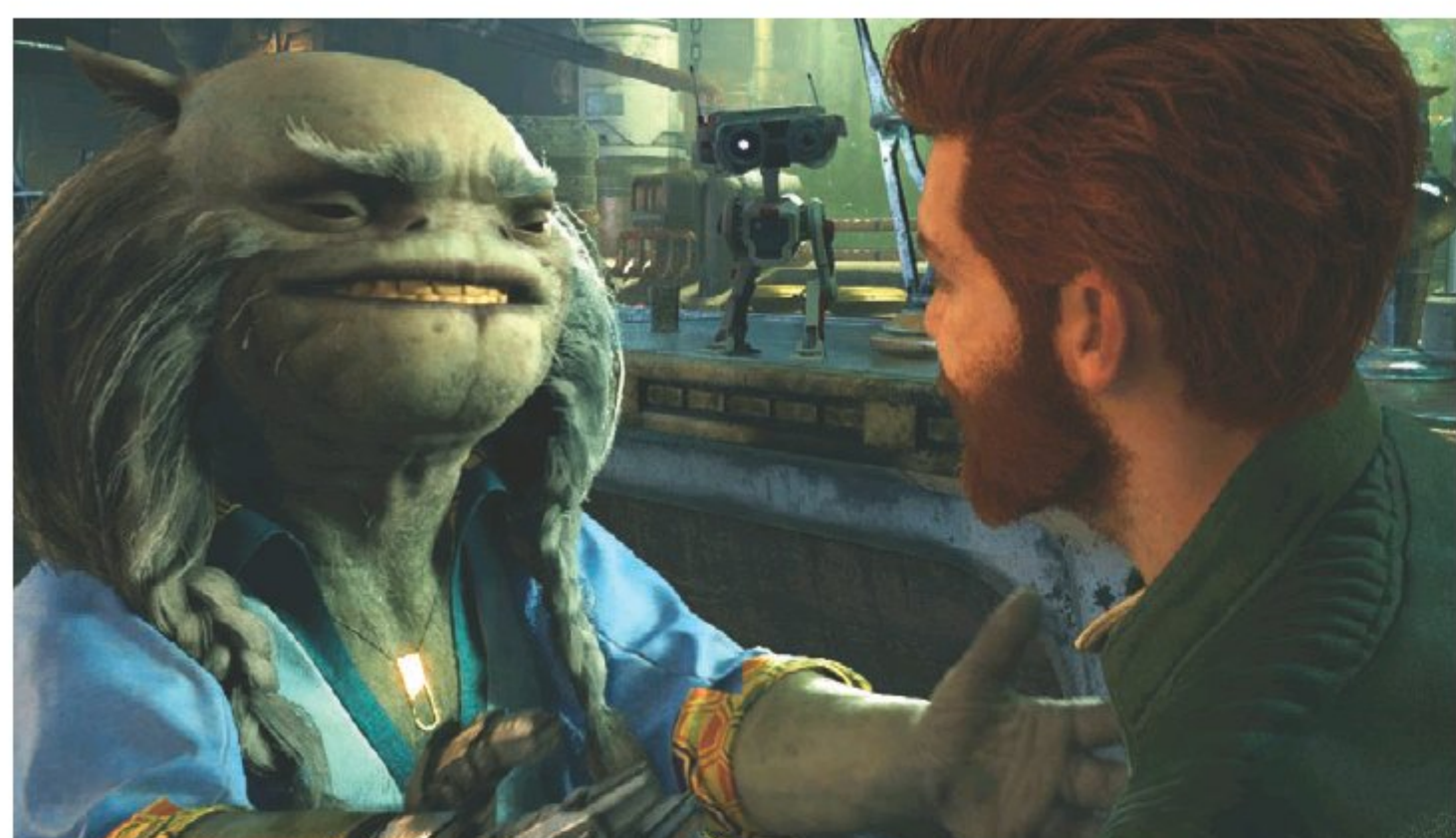
- You've always wondered why Jedi don't carry blasters.
- You preordered Jedi: Survivor and wanna show off the Han Solo blaster.
- You like beating Stormtroopers at their own game.



CROSSGUARD

- You've always carried a gigantic sword in Souls games, so why stop?
- You're mostly in it for the cool-looking crossguard vents.
- You want to annihilate an enemy's block meter.

Cal Kestis of Nazerene.



FAR LEFT: *Jedi: Survivor's* super jump balloons are goofy, but very fun.

LEFT: *Jedi: Survivor's* minimap is a lot easier to read this time around, and I like that it doesn't give away too much.

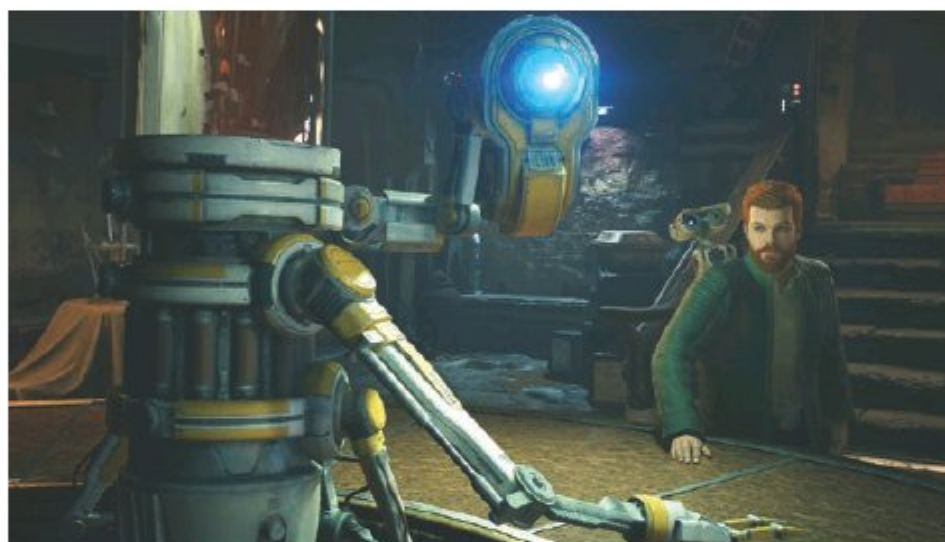


A dense group of Stormtroopers are just asking for a saber throw.



RIGHT: When Cal wants to get down faster, he just grabs a dinosaur's legs.

FAR RIGHT: Optional boss fights don't mess around. This one was a 1v3.



Respawn squeezes a lot of cool sights out of the single planet of Koboh.



» will find a specific lightsaber piece and recognise an obscure reference, but I found a setup I liked early on and rarely changed it, which speaks to a general loot problem in *Jedi: Survivor*. You never know if the next chest Cal opens is holding a permanent upgrade, new ears for BD-1, or a handlebar moustache.

Some of my favourite *Jedi: Survivor* moments came from poking around a side path on my way to the bigger mission. I was always on the hunt for these little purple rifts that teleport Cal to a dream-like world for platforming or combat challenges.

JEDI ACADEMY

The one aspect of *Jedi: Survivor* that hasn't been reimagined, but didn't really need to be, is combat. It has been enhanced, though, and is even better now that droids are in the mix. Cal has gotten a lot more lethal with a saber in the five year time skip – limbs are chopped off from heavy attacks, giant bugs can be entirely bisected, and sometimes Cal will unholster his blaster for a finishing execution that I assume he learned watching John Wick.

Oh right, Cal has a blaster now. It's one of the two saber stances new to *Jedi: Survivor*, for a total of five: single saber, double-sided saber, dual saber, blaster and crossguard. I'm impressed at how Respawn has managed to make what is essentially the same saber feel like five distinct weapons – each stance has a unique moveset, its own upgrade tree and inherent tradeoffs. The double-sided saber's long reach, for instance, makes it the undisputed king of

crowd control but doesn't hit as hard. Dual sabers deal a lot of damage quickly, but you have to commit to long combos that expose Cal's flanks. Crossguard stance (the Kylo Ren one) is basically a medieval claymore: devastating chops and cleaves that take a long wind up to connect.

I ended up maining the blaster and crossguard stances for the majority of the game because they were easily the most fun to experiment with. The blaster stance in particular feels so delightfully un-Star Wars. Half of your attacks become ranged

The Jedi equivalent of a cheesy magic build in *Elden Ring*

and you replenish blaster ammo by dealing saber damage. The saber attacks in blaster mode mimic fencing moves, which don't hit as hard as the dedicated single saber stance, but let you keep your distance while recharging your gun.

The blaster has a nice give and take that's consistent with every stance, though most weaknesses can be overcome with upgrade points. The weapon trees are a healthy mix of incremental upgrades and entirely new moves. After maxing-out the blaster tree and equipping a few complimentary perks, I managed to clear entire rooms without swinging a saber – definitely the Jedi equivalent of a cheesy magic build in *Elden Ring*, and I feel no shame.

Jedi: Survivor's combat clicked way better with me than *Fallen Order*'s. Stances are part of it, and having easily three times more types of enemies is nice, but honestly, I like that it's easier. I hardly ever lost to a normal group of enemies and when I did, those shortcuts got me back to the action in no time.

Health stims are easier to find and several are doled out by progressing the story.

ROUGH GO

The only thing that threatened to ruin my good time were the constant performance issues with the PC version. Even with Nvidia's latest driver specifically optimised for the game, my framerate regularly slowed to a crawl at very annoying moments. Cutscenes often plummet to 15-20fps, cut off or overlap dialogue, and don't recover until I get control back.

I'm no Unreal Engine expert, but the worst slowdowns always seem to occur when the game's loading stuff in the background. Using the galaxy map on Cal's ship turned into a slideshow every single time. Performance in the most open parts of Koboh is pretty bad, too. On an RTX 2080 Super, i9-9900KS 4.00GHz, and 32GB RAM, I was lucky to squeeze a 35fps average in the semi-open world. Isolated levels ran flawlessly at 80-90fps, so there's clearly something up with the way Respawn is drawing big spaces. I briefly tried one other machine (RTX 3060, Ryzen 7 5700G, 16GB RAM) and had the same problems.

Fiddling with graphics options didn't help much, either. There's no native option to limit the framerate, but the Nvidia control panel did the trick. The only upscaling option is FSR 2.0, which usually failed to improve my fps but always succeeded in making Cal's face blurry and unintelligible in motion.

There's a patch coming a few days before launch, and hopefully it'll help, but I'd be surprised if all of those framerate drops disappeared overnight. We are living in a time of bad PC ports, after all.

Unacceptable performance aside, the good news is I still had a great time. *Jedi: Survivor* is a bigger, bolder game than its predecessor that prioritises tight level design over map scale, a rarity in an age of sprawling sandboxes. This is Respawn firing on all cylinders, having finally figured out what works in its weird *Souls*-like adventure format. ■



LORE BREAK When does Jedi: Survivor happen in the Star Wars timeline?



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Star Wars Jedi: Survivor is an excellent sequel, but maybe wait for a few patches for better performance.

80

BE KIND, REWIND

TERRA NIL is a soothing, satisfying and educational environmentalist puzzler

By Dominic Tarason

Sometimes you just want to relax with a game by yourself. Low pressure, soothing sounds, just enough challenge to keep you engaged but not frustrated. Environmentalist strategy puzzler *Terra Nil* fits the bill, and puts a refreshing low-key spin on the city-builder genre, making it all the more surprising that it comes from Free Lives, developers of raucous meathead action games like *Broforce*, *Gorn* and... err... *Genital Jousting*.

Officially billed as a 'reverse city builder', it's not inaccurate to describe *Terra Nil* as such. It's a game about spending and generating resources, building synergistic chains of structures to achieve numerical goals.

Despite this, *Terra Nil* owes more to puzzle games and solitaire than anything else.

Terra Nil is a meditation on what we – as a species – owe to our world. You're not building for profit or victory, but restoring a barren, toxic wasteland to life, reintroducing animals before cleaning up your own mess. Turns out that restoring beauty and then tidying up is a surprisingly compelling loop for a game.

Terra Nil is surprisingly slight and focused. There are initially only four missions played in order, each taking place in a different procedurally generated environment. The environments require distinct techniques and equipment to revive, each providing a different palette of tools and structures to use.

Each Genesis Project is a three-stage process. Starting with a lifeless isometric canvas, you're asked to restore the basic climate and essential greenery through placing toxin scrubbers and irrigators, drawing from a limited pool of money that's increased by making particularly efficient moves. Lower difficulties allow you to undo mistakes. Higher settings force a do-over if you run out of cash. Never too hard, but always a concern.

With enough green and blue foundation laid, more structures

unlock, allowing you to further manipulate the environment and grow habitats to fill a quota. Lastly, each mission asks you to scan the environments you've created to find

ideal homes for an assortment of animals, and then to clean up, leaving you to sit back and appreciate the new, pristine environment.

NATURE FORCE

Terra Nil conveys its message through

mechanics. Brute force works, but it's more efficient to work with nature. Cloud Seeders near bodies of water won't do much at first, but the rising humidity will kickstart natural rains,

The randomly generated maps provide their own challenges

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A solo environmentalist 'reverse city builder'

EXPECT TO PAY
\$36.99

DEVELOPER
Free Lives

PUBLISHER
Devolver Digital

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-9900k, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce 2080Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
terraniil.com

cleansing the entire map if you're willing to just sit for a while and let nature take its course while enjoying the rain.

That's where the joy of *Terra Nil* lay for me. Finding the tricks in each environment to nudge nature into doing the heavy lifting was always satisfying. A well-placed water pump on a hill can fill multiple rivers and lakes. A controlled wildfire can create fertile ground for an entire forest. You're kickstarting natural processes again, not building a base, and perhaps learning a bit about how these environments formed.

It also makes it an entertaining game to return to, although with perhaps diminishing returns. The randomly generated maps provide their own challenges, with the placement of a natural lake or river often defining your strategy. But, like a good game of solitaire, unpredictability and adapting to what chance provides is part of the fun, although your toolbox is robust enough to make failure a distant concern with a little practice.

These random aspects of *Terra Nil* do sometimes go awry; getting top marks can require a specific arrangement of biomes the map doesn't supply. Perhaps reflective of nature's capriciousness, but mildly frustrating in a videogame. Not a major problem but a minor wrinkle. Still, without that unpredictability, the game would lose a lot of its longevity – all things in balance.

Terra Nil's themes are reflected in its design; as much fun as you might be having, sometimes it's best to just clean up when you're done and move on. Not everything has to last forever or grow endlessly. Bowing out brings its own satisfaction. ■

WEATHER REPORT

Get a heads-up on the worst obstacles waiting in each environment

TEMPERATE: RIVERS

Your expansion will be defined by natural waterways, but sometimes you'll have to carve out your own with excavators.



TROPICAL: FOUNDATIONS

With the map covered in water, you'll need mineralizers to grow outcroppings to build wind farms.



POLAR: LAVA

Before you can create a winter wonderland, you'll need to blast for geothermal power and volcanic rocks to kickstart life.



CONTINENTAL: RADIATION

Mankind's old mistakes will come to haunt you in these city ruins, but sunflowers can help mop up all those nasty isotopes.



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

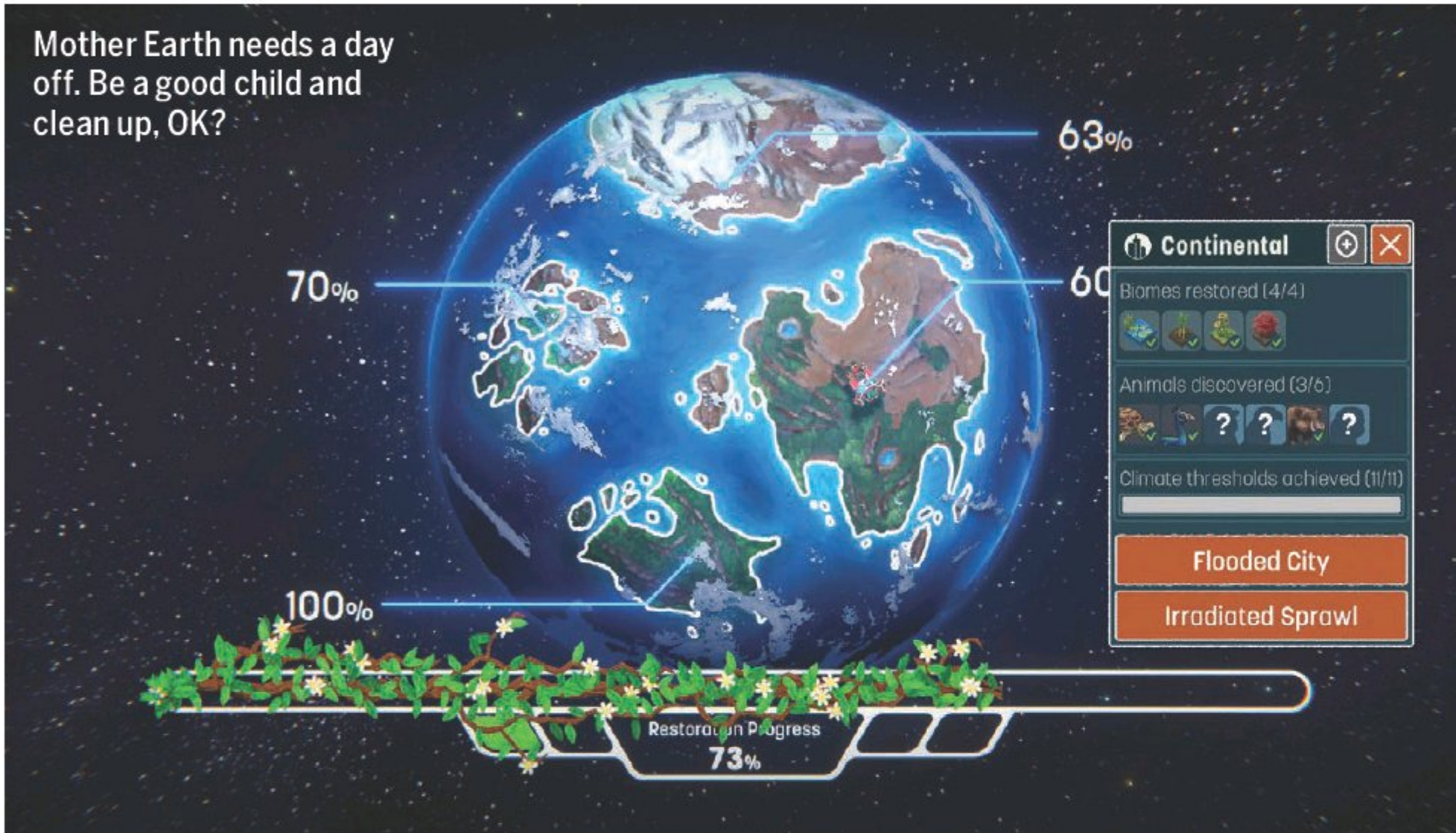
Terra Nil is a small but satisfying strategy puzzler that comes, does its job, and then leaves without fuss.

80

Each environment needs more effort to restore.



Mother Earth needs a day off. Be a good child and clean up, OK?



LEFT: The Temperate variant mission is an abandoned quarry, ideal for a huge lake.



BELOW: The Polar environment requires a bit of fire before you can bring in the ice.



THROWING SHADERS

THE LAST OF US PART 1 is an appalling port of a PlayStation classic

By Phil Iwaniuk

You've heard by now, of course. Sony's unanimously adored 2013 stealth-action cry-along *The Last of Us Part 1* has not arrived on PC in fine form. The performance issues are numerous and significant, and over a week on from launch, despite two patches from developer Naughty Dog and a driver hotfix from Nvidia, they persist.

It was supposed to be so different. The internet's servers are heaving under the weight of all the Bella Ramsey and Pedro Pascal memes that *The Last of Us* TV adaptation has spawned, and this fortuitously timed PC release should have been our chance not just to play a celebrated classic in its best form, but to enjoy it as a companion piece to the hot HBO series of the hour.

It's not that. Instead, it's a battle against a shader cache that takes longer to load than even the most un-optimised console emulator you've downloaded from the darkest corners of retro gaming internet forums. There are reviews on the game's Steam page that claim the two-hour refund period expired before it had finished building its shaders, and they're not joking. Fortunately, Steam has made an

exception and is offering refunds to any players who purchased *The Last of Us*, no questions asked. That's an indictment of quite how bad this launch situation is.

I've installed the game three times

on two different systems, and the absolute quickest I've seen *The Last of Us* complete its shader building is 40 minutes. The slowest, after the game's 1.0.1.6 patch incidentally, took well over two hours. I've

seen users with RTX 4090s reporting shader build times of over an hour.

What happens if you don't wait until it's finished building its shaders? In my experience, it's a *The Last of Us* flip book. On both an RTX 2080Ti and a 3060, performance levels were so low with an incomplete shader cache that it was unplayable. And even if I could live with the chugging framerate, the graphical artefacts all

An indictment of quite how bad this launch situation is

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A seminal PlayStation post-apocalyptic narrative adventure

EXPECT TO PAY
\$94.95

DEVELOPER
Naughty Dog

PUBLISHER
Sony

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-9700K,
16GB RAM,
Nvidia RTX 2080Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3o1SXvw

over the screen are really something to contend with. Joel's hair and eyebrows became squares of block colour in one cutscene for me. In another, Sarah's bedroom became a nightmare of floaty objects. After the shaders were compiled, I didn't notice any visual artefacts. The wait, then, is basically a mandatory one.

GRAPHICS SETTINGS

On high graphics settings and above, this is the best the game has ever looked. But the framerate at medium settings on both systems is inconsistent and not much fun during combat sequences. Cycling between presets doesn't do much to alleviate choppiness, and aside from on the low preset I didn't notice a dramatic increase in framerate.

What I did notice, however, was that my CPU was being absolutely thrashed as I was running the game. My 2080Ti runs at 100% capacity in system resources, but more worryingly my i7-9700K – hardly a bottleneck in any other games I play – was also at either 99% or 100% the entire time, as was my system memory. That's a recipe for freezes and crashes. In fairness, I've only ever experienced a CTD while alt-tabbing, but freezes are more commonplace on the streets of Boston. And don't get me started on the loading times.

All of this means that while the game's technically playable at launch, it's not enjoyable. It's several patches and driver updates away from enjoyable, in fact.

Sony's other PC ports have been exemplary lately, and although *Horizon: Zero Dawn*'s shaders are also in no particular hurry to compile, the issue isn't anything like as pronounced as it is here. And given the fact this PC port was specifically delayed to allow time for further optimisation – well, I'm bewildered.

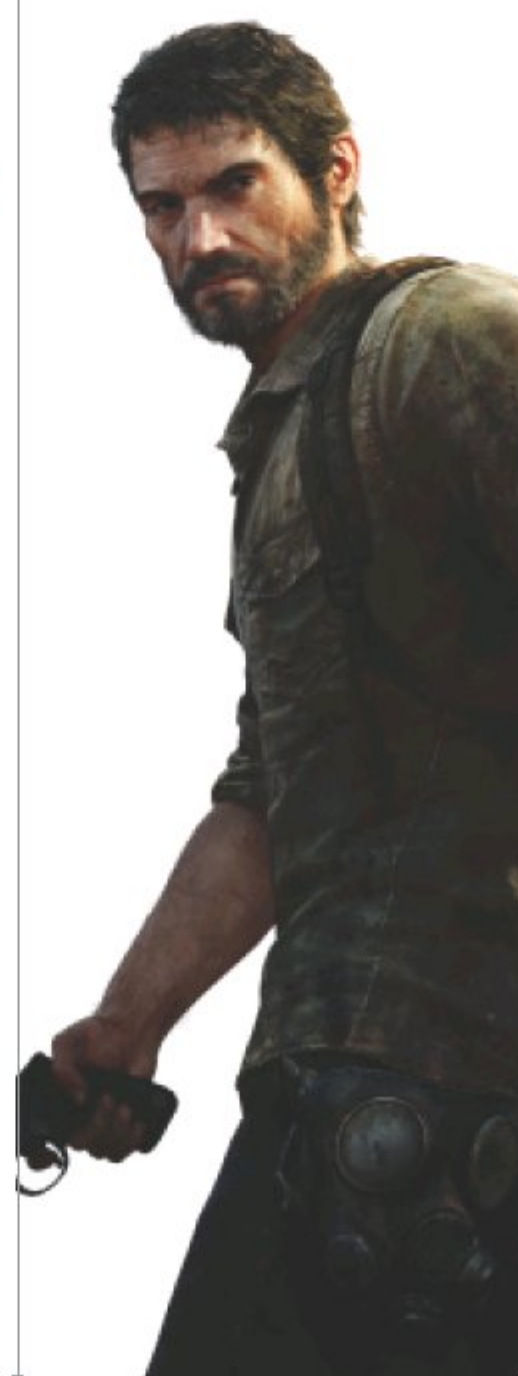
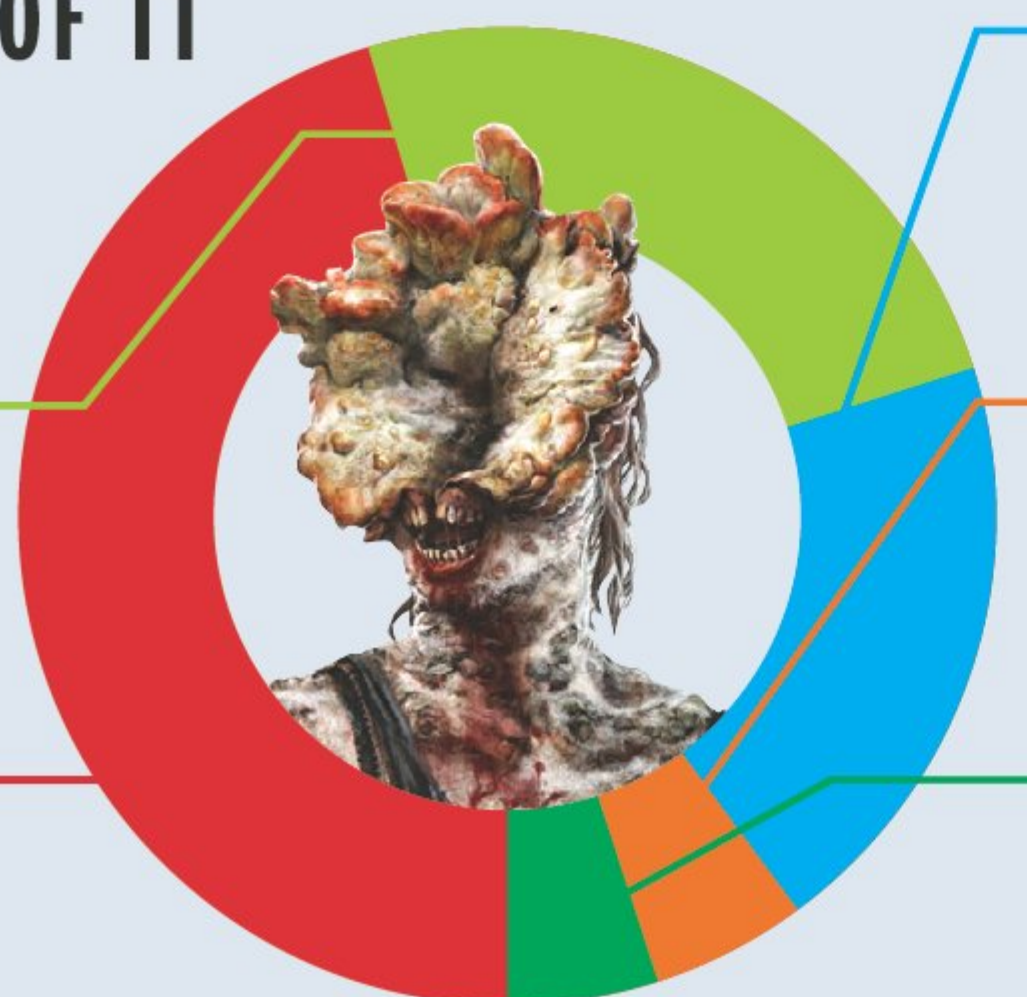
You can see the detail and effort that's been poured into this version,

THE BEST OF IT

What you actually do in Sony's classic

25% SHIVING MUSHROOMS
Stab them from behind and they go down quiet.

45% BUILDING SHADERS
Rome wasn't built in a day, but this Boston was.



Honestly, where would
Naughty Dog be
without boosts?



'Cause it is gonna kick
a hell of a lot more than any BB rifle.



FAR LEFT: Parenting's
on hard mode in the
end times.

LEFT: Joel's no
Corvo Atano
– melee takedowns
are slow and painful.



Joel: It's a pleasure meeting you.



RIGHT: On higher difficulties, ammo is so scarce that headshots are mandatory.

FAR RIGHT: During the back half, you're equipped with some powerful hardware.



It's not always a sneaky affair. Mushrooms hate fire too.



» too. The audio settings are as comprehensive as you'll ever find in a game's options menu, and although tweaking the graphics options isn't as clear and immediate as in, say, *Resident Evil Village* with its handy GDDR capacity counter, it's by no means a lightweight set of parameters to tweak. The issues didn't happen because nobody checked whether the game ran properly, or because the developers aren't diligent or hardworking. But still, here we are.

BUFF DADDY

Let's talk about the game though, shall we? On the off chance it becomes playable in the near future. I happened to be on staff at Official PlayStation Magazine when the game first launched in 2013, and the fervour for it around the office was something I've only known once or twice in my career. Here was a post-apocalyptic story seemingly of the kind the industry was already over-saturating us with – urban areas 'being reclaimed by nature' were as ubiquitous in 2013 as bows and arrows – but despite this it immediately stood out because it placed its focus on people, and did so to incredible effect.

The impact of *The Last of Us*' grown-up tone is lessened now in 2023, but that's partly because Naughty Dog's style of dialogue scripting and performance capture became so influential. "This could be a movie or a TV show," we all said to each other while that famous intro plays out. Sarah wakes up alone in a uniquely convincing home, paces about half-asleep while outside there are sirens and strange noises. With barely a word spoken, *The Last of Us* grounds you in a real-world setting and asserts that there will be no *Uncharted* eyebrow-wagging here.

Like 2013's other big game, *BioShock Infinite*, this is a study of fatherhood. Unlike the former with its infinite loops and bearded men fathering their own dads, Joel's story is stripped back, raw, and messy. That's what the apocalypse is so great at, as a setting – cutting away all the extraneous noise from life and leaving only the absolute essentials. How does humanity prevail when all the infrastructure around it has been

cut away? And most tricky of all: how do you hold on to your humanity?

Joel's grieving. He's used that grief to his advantage, shutting his feelings off and doing what he needs to in order to survive. Until he's tasked with smuggling a 14-year-old girl who reminds him of his daughter, at which point some long-dormant

paternal love awakens and both he and you are pulled in two directions – you both want what's best for Ellie, but you have to commit some pretty monstrous acts to keep her safe. Every fight, you're trading away a

bit of your humanity to preserve hers.

You're not Doomguy, but a man in a shirt that looks like it smells bad

WALK THIS WAY

You really do have that sense, then and now. And what's especially impressive is that you're so emotionally invested, so early on, while mechanically the game's doing almost nothing to entertain you. In the opening two hours you're either walking from point to point while someone walks beside you explaining the world, or moving a ladder into place. Take it from an old PlayStation mag alumnus – this game might have the BAFTAs, but *Uncharted* works so

much harder to keep you having fun on a mechanical level.

When *The Last of Us* does ask more from you than deftly holding forwards on the left stick, its combat offers you a choice: go in with your shotgun drawn and make a mess, or scuttle about between cover, pop a home-made shiv in someone's unsuspecting neck and, well, make a quieter mess. *Metal Gear Solid V* it ain't, and never was, but the quality of animations and the weapon and item crafting systems elevate it above your typical meat-and-potatoes action game fights.

The fights were never meant to be stylish, of course. You're not Doomguy, hopping between elaborate melee moves in sync with a deathcore breakdown. You're a man in a shirt that looks like it smells bad, doing what you're forced to by the circumstances you find yourself in. As such, combat's never flamboyant and rarely satisfying. And that, along with the unrelenting 'Manchester on a rainy Monday morning' colour palette, has always kept me slightly more at arm's length from *The Last of Us* than everyone else.

It's still an important part of gaming history. It's a significant moment, one in which a triple-A dev decided it would try to tell a story in as cinematic and grown-up a fashion as possible, with a focus on the subtleties of its performers. Little breaks in their voices. Lingering looks. Words unsaid. Truth be told, I never cared much about the Fireflies or the giraffe or the long list of desperate survivors who double-cross Joel and Ellie. But I've always respected the consistency of tone.

It's a shame that a *The Last of Us* review has to carry such a low score. It feels like slamming *Citizen Kane* because its Blu-ray features aren't up to standard, such is the game's stellar reputation. But the state of the PC version isn't just disappointing or annoying – at the time of writing it's actually a real barrier preventing you from playing the experience properly. There's an all-timer laying dormant behind all the issues, but at present on PC, this one just doesn't click. ■

THE FIRST OF THEM

Joel and Ellie's earliest concepts



ELLIE

Never the snappiest dresser. What would her parents say about the state of those jeans? Oh, right. Yeah.



JOEL

Half man, half forehead. Rumour has it Naughty Dog originally wanted a Klingon to play him. "At ease, Mr Worf."

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The PlayStation classic *The Last of Us Part 1* remains out of reach on PC due to debilitating performance issues.

50

ROOK HARD

RAVENBOUND spreads its roguelite ambitions across an island too big for its own good

By Rick Lane

My gut says *Ravenbound* took flight a little too early, flapping furiously with half-formed wings as it tailspins into mediocrity. Developed by Avalanche Studios offshoot Systemic Reaction, *Ravenbound* has the bones of a decent game – gorgeous environments, fast-paced combat and a progression system that gives you just enough forward momentum to stop you from giving your monitor a flying lesson by tossing it out of the window. But that gorgeous world is also staid and lifeless, one that makes little effort to conceal its role as a mere backdrop for a punishing grind to power.

Ravenbound's premise is explained in the game's introductory cutscene, the mythic Scandinavian vibes of which are only slightly spoiled by the distractingly cockney voiceover. The island of Avalt was watched over by six gods known as the Ellri. But one of those gods basically went off, like a bag of potatoes left in the cupboard for too long, covering the land in the sticky black goo of hatred. To fight the Betrayer, the five remaining gods channelled all their energy into creating a magical raven, which doesn't seem like the most practical way for five gods to beat one other god, especially since the effort to do so makes them so weak that the

Betrayer imprisons them inside mountain tombs for all eternity. Luckily, the magical raven escaped, and ever since has sought a worthy warrior to bind with and take the fight to the Betrayer.

That warrior is you. Or at least, it will be, once several dozen other *Ravenbound* have had their skulls ground to flour by Avalt's ferociously hostile inhabitants.

Between you and the Betrayer are all manner of bandits, trolls, draugr, electrically charged mages, strange goblin-like critters and other deadly foes. They all guard chests containing goodies you'll need to bust the five remaining gods out from their

You're constantly evading blades by a feather's breadth

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Ambitious but underbaked blend of open-world RPG and roguelite

EXPECT TO PAY
\$43.95

DEVELOPER
Systemic Reaction

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 5 3600, 32GB RAM, Nvidia RTX 2080 Super

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
ravenboundgame.com

sepulchral prisons, and they'll all kill your *Ravenbound* within seconds if you're anything but completely focused on the task at hand.

FIGHTING

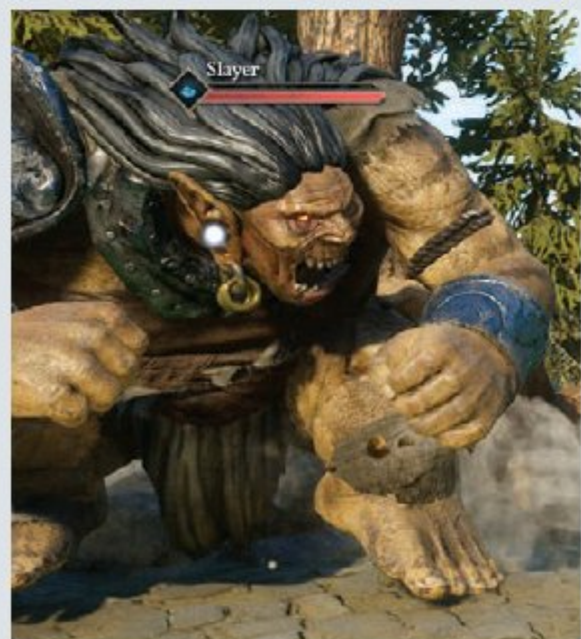
Combat forms the bulk of *Ravenbound*'s play, and it's best described in two words: hard and fast. Battles in *Ravenbound* are extremely kinetic. Enemies are relentless in their attacks, and you'll rarely fight fewer than three at any given time, meaning you're pretty much constantly evading their blades by a feather's breadth. After completing the tutorial section, my first *Ravenbound* died the instant they wandered into their first bandit camp, as I simply wasn't prepared for the force of the assault.

Surviving a fight requires judicious use of two abilities: dodging and blocking. The former is a sliding evasion manoeuvre that, if timed perfectly, will imbue your character with frenzy, giving them a minor damage boost. The latter protects your character in a large energy bubble that can withstand a few hits before breaking. Moreover, if you time a block so it activates just before an enemy attack hits, it will parry it, making you briefly invulnerable and often knocking enemies down.

Is the combat well designed? I'm still not sure. The game relies heavily on outnumbering you to maintain the difficulty level, with the result that you spend a lot of time in encounters sliding around on your knees like Sam Gideon from *Vanquish*. Fights against certain enemies, like trios of draugr, and the goblin-like tuftir, require an absurd amount of evasion. The bubble-block also feels like a compromise deriving from budget. One of the base classes carries a roundshield they never actually use for blocking. Nonetheless, it does have a certain flair, and winning a fight in *Ravenbound* always got my blood pumping. Your reward for clearing an enemy camp is twofold.

CREATURE FEATURE

The island of Avalt is filled with dangerous creatures



TROLL
These beasts are tough and strong, but are also slow, making them easier to fight than most other enemies.

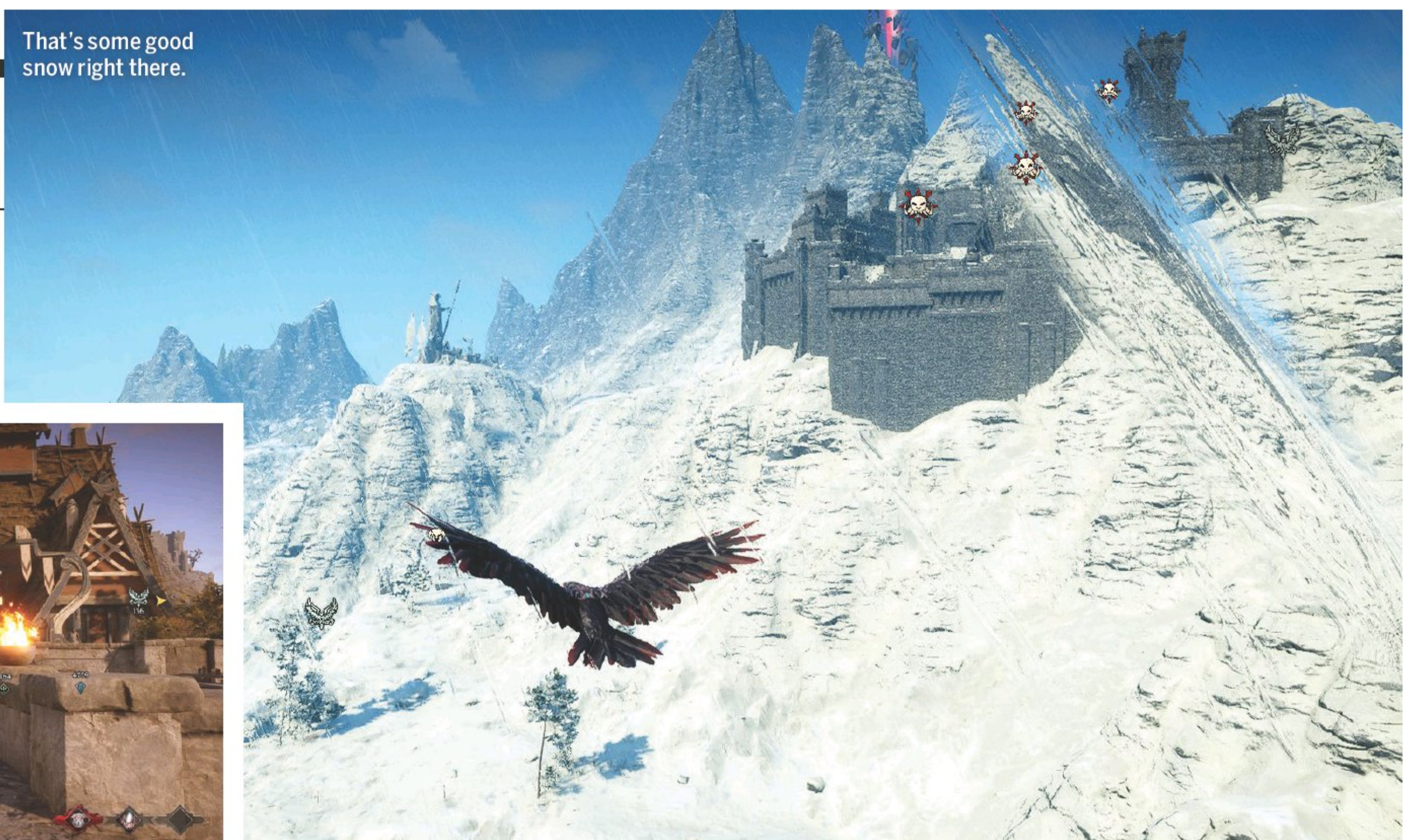


TUFTIR
Small, aggressive goblin-like creatures that attack in packs of a dozen or so. A moderate challenge.



DRAUGR
Undead humans. Their attacks have a deceptively long reach, making them very difficult to fight in numbers.

That's some good snow right there.

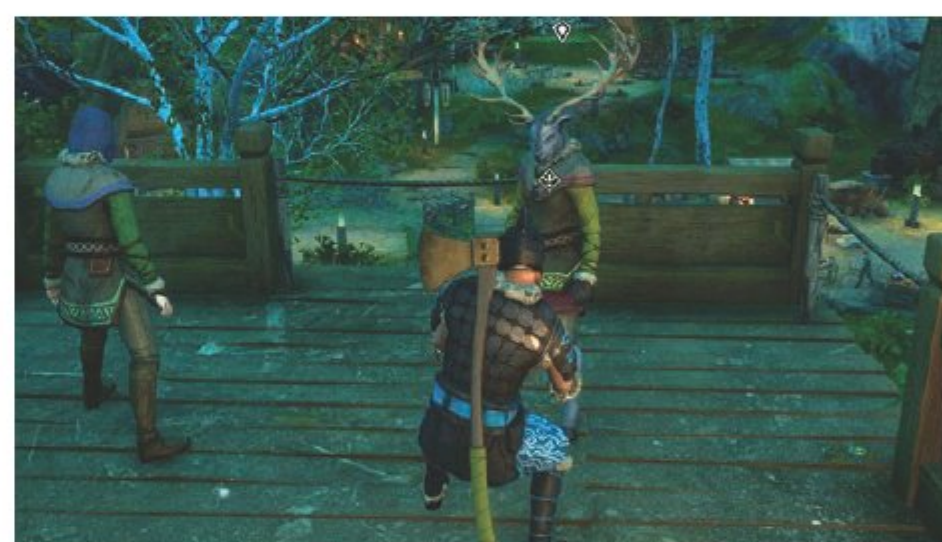


While you'll spend most of your time on the back foot, you do occasionally get to pummel your foes.



LEFT: The bubble guard may be a bit odd, but it does make parrying spectacular.

BELOW: Fighting big groups like this is incredibly challenging.





RIGHT: Avall is visually impressive, but the world contains few surprises.

FAR RIGHT: Opening most chests will increase your hatred, so you'll need to think carefully about when to seek out bosses.



» You'll collect card fragments from fallen enemies, and get to unlock that chest your foes were guarding. Both lead to the same reward: the opportunity to select one of three cards from your warrior's deck. These cards could improve your weapon or armour, or give you more specific status effects, like a 75% bonus to weapon damage, or a more resilient guard-bubble.

In this manner, your character becomes stronger with every enemy camp they clear. But two complications squat rudely on your power curve. First, cards require mana to use, a resource that appears semi-randomly in chests. Second, every opened chest and implemented upgrade increases your hatred level. Hatred increases your chance to draw a hatred card alongside your rewards. These automatically boost the HP and damage of bosses every subsequent time you upgrade. In short, the more upgrades you pursue, the more difficult the game gets.

Hence, the first time you square off with one of the wardens guarding those godly prisons, you'll likely get mulched. But that's OK! As you explore, not only will you upgrade your character with existing cards, you'll also unlock new ones as you complete certain challenges. When you die, those new cards are shuffled into your deck, increasing your chance to create a more powerful build with your next Ravenbound.

ROGUELITE

As a roguelite, *Ravenbound* functions well enough, although the system does produce a couple of issues. The randomised way mana appears, combined with the fact that more powerful mana cards have to be unlocked like all other upgrades, means early runs can really suck, as you struggle to accrue sufficient mana to purchase decent cards. More broadly, having to build your Ravenbound's gear entirely from scratch every time does become wearying.

This is where the open world comes in, at least notionally. As I mentioned, you unlock new cards by completing challenges, which range from killing a new enemy type for the first time, to killing a certain number

of enemies, to clearing multiple camps without taking any damage, and so forth. Because of this, it's not always wise to go barrelling straight for the first boss, instead seeking out challenges to complete so you can bulk out your hand. Exploring can also increase that particular character's legacy, a separate

currency used to buy new character types such as wolf- and deer-men, new weapons like longswords and greataxes, and new status effects.

In this way, there's an element of creating

your own objectives to *Ravenbound*, which I appreciate. And when those objectives involve defeating a new type of enemy for the first time, they're pretty fun. Most new cards, however, are unlocked through grinding, killing 50 or 100 enemies of a specific type, killing a certain number of enemies with a particular weapon type, or completing a specific tomb a set number of times.

The sense of grind is compounded by how arbitrary the open world feels. Åvalt is a huge space with multiple biomes including forest, autumnal forest, snowy forest and desert (or as I call it, 'not forest'). You can travel virtually anywhere from the off, thanks to your character's ability to transform into a raven and fly over the map.

But nearly all this real-estate is taken up solely by enemy camps, while everything else exists purely as window dressing. The many inviting ruins scattered across the map are empty of either treasures to plunder

or narrative context to enrich the world. The elaborate settlements you'll visit across your adventure contain a handful of basic vendors and precisely one quest giver. These quests always involve – you guessed it – clearing enemy camps. You just get a bit more money for it. Occasionally, you'll come across an inscribed stone that provides a scrap of story, but as far as inviting exploration goes, that's about it.

QUOTH THE...

The sheer size of the world, combined with how functionally sparse it is, is what makes me wonder whether *Ravenbound* is flying from its roost in premature form. There are other indicators here. All the NPCs you encounter in settlements stand in the exact same default stance, with no attempt to make these areas feel like living places. The game also suffers from a substantial array of bugs, ranging from cosmetic issues like NPC models vanishing from settlements, to more significant problems like audio glitching out, or enemy health bars not depleting properly. While none of these are ideal, the latter two are a real pain to deal with in the middle of a boss fight, especially when death means resetting large amounts of progress.

All these issues are a shame, as there is potential here. The core of the combat is entertaining, especially on those rare occasions when you absolutely beast a camp. The roguelite system seems intelligently put together, and unlocking new cards is always gratifying. And while it may feel inert, the open world can be beautiful. I particularly like the mountain regions, with snow falling from the sky in fat, heavy chunks that effectively communicates the coldness in this environment.

Nonetheless, I don't think I could recommend *Ravenbound*. The attempt to mesh open-world gaming with a roguelite structure is admirable, but the emptiness of the former undermines the potential of the latter, resulting in a combat system spread too thinly across a canvas that's too large. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

There's merit in *Ravenbound's* kinetic combat, but the game's ambition is undermined by technical issues.

58

Every opened chest and upgrade increases your hatred level

CARD SHARP

There are almost 200 cards to collect



BOAR BONE NEEDLE

Increases weapon damage by 75%, arguably the most crucial card in the early game.



UNBROKEN CUFFS

Increases stagger impact by 100%, making it that much easier to interrupt enemy attacks.



BITE OF THE BRUTAL

Increases your critical damage by 220%. Enemies die faster, if you can hit them.

STRATEGIC RETREAT

MINECRAFT LEGENDS is an action strategy spinoff that fails both genres

By Lauren Morton

Minecraft Legends captures the flavour of standard Minecraft well: the action strategy spinoff has a familiar art style, a colourful world, and a procedural map. It doesn't bring along Minecraft's substance, though, and the result is a genre mashup that's disappointing as an action game and as a strategy game.

I start out in *Minecraft Legends* as I would in standard *Minecraft*: exploring different biomes – forests, badlands, swamps and tundras, but no caves, sorry – and collecting resources. I direct my Allay friends to mine coal or iron or redstone, which automatically fills my resource meters. One Allay chips away at the edge of a nearby forest to collect 500 wood logs that I'll use to build a perimeter wall around a village while another gathers a surface iron vein so I can erect a masonry building to upgrade those walls to stone.

My main goal is to defeat three factions of piglins who have escaped from the Nether to dominate the Overworld by crafting my own army of *Minecraft* mobs. Each night we defend the world's villages from

piglin attacks. By day I rebuild the defences and then set out to make my own assault on piglin bases.

UN SOUND FOUNDATIONS

Legends has avoided calling itself a real-time strategy game, opting instead for 'action strategy' because I have control of my own hero character and command my units from the ground rather than a godlike RTS perspective. Ultimately, *Legends* has wound up with a style of combat that serves both action and strategy poorly; it

requires intense micromanagement without actual strategic depth.

The only 'action' in this combat is using a single button to swing my sword back and forth, tickling piglins away from my defensive structures. The strategy bit is worse: an

An escort mission that forces me to play helicopter parent

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An action RTS

EXPECT TO PAY
\$49.95

DEVELOPER
Blackbird Interactive/
Mojang Studios

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
Intel i7-8700K,
32GB RAM, Nvidia RTX
2070 Super

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
minecraft.net/en-us/about-legends

unending escort mission that forces me to play helicopter parent to my own armies. To begin controlling the units I've built, I need to stand near them and press Q, waving my command flag to call creatures within a small radius around me to follow. With an initial cap of 15 mobs 'lured' I can direct them to attack a single target or gather at a location.

I can create slightly more specific orders by asking only ranged mobs to target a lava launcher enemy while asking my cobblestone golems to defend a hole in my outer wall. If I want to redirect them, I have to physically ride over, wave my flag to lure as many as I can reach, and ride away to point them in a new direction. There is no overhead strategy view for short-handing this process. Many small piglin outposts require me to build ramps so my mobs can reach enemy structures and I often find them standing beneath a ramp after being knocked off a platform, forcing me to shepherd them back to their target.

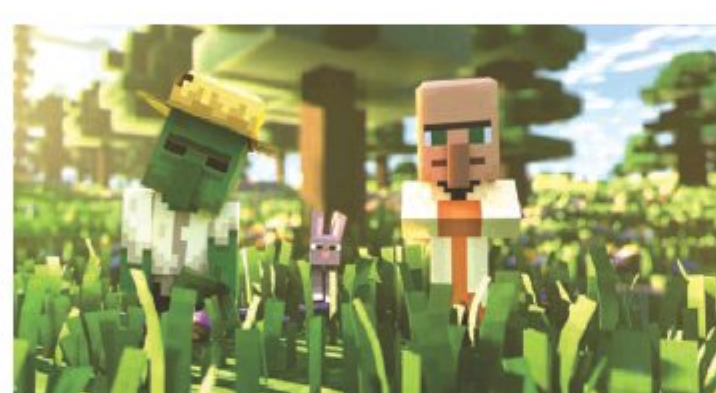
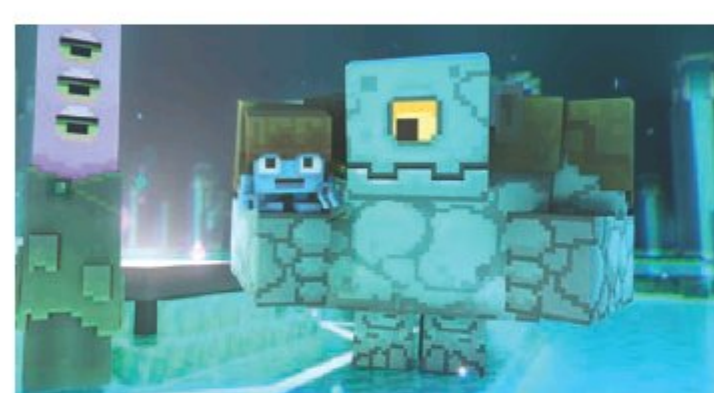
Every battle makes me less a commander of armies and more a minder of preschoolers, zigzagging through my own base or an enemy



ABOVE: Lava Launchers are destructive, so focus your golems on them.



Cobblestone golems make quick work of destroying structures.



TOP: Destroying a portal with a Redstone Launcher isn't as climactic as I hoped.

ABOVE: Action, Knowledge and Foresight act as your Overworld guides.

fortress to hold my toddler warriors by the hand. I'm constantly losing track of where I've put them because my own defensive walls block my view of the battlefield and the HUD compass is a poor substitute for a proper minimap.

Coming up with interesting strategies feels pointless because *Minecraft Legends* lacks the tools I'd need to enact all but the simplest plans. I'd hoped that assaulting the largest fortresses for each faction would present an interesting challenge, and they do require that I use my Allays to turn netherrack into normal blocks I can build my own structures on, but otherwise they're just a drawn-out version of every other battle: standing directly behind my units watching them plink away at an enemy spawner until I need to give them a new order.

The worst part is that *Minecraft Legends* didn't have the decency to be a dumpster fire. As a piece of software, I've got no complaints; I've had no issues with framerate, bugs, crashes, or control layouts. But it's a disappointing game. *Minecraft's* values of creativity and player choice didn't make it into this spinoff. ■

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

Minecraft Legends is an action strategy spinoff that disappoints both genres and misses *Minecraft's* magic.

50



MOB WATCH *Legends' new golems*



PLANK

Archer-like wood golems that do more damage against enemy units. They'll be your backbone for defending villages from piglin invasions.



COBBLESTONE

These are great at pounding away on enemy structures. Try to take out piglin spawners first when assaulting an outpost.



MOSSY

These support golems spray water to heal your other mobs. Make sure to bring a few along with you when you assault fortresses.



GRINDSTONE

These special mobs can stun enemies, so be sure to have them lead the charge against Lava Launchers and Pigmadillos.

CULT CLASSIC

SHERLOCK HOLMES: THE AWAKENED shows no scars from its development in a war zone

By Robin Valentine

It's impossible to review *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened* without addressing its circumstances. Caught in the chaos of Russia's attempted invasion of Ukraine, developer Frogwares decided to crowdfund a project that might be quickly achievable amid regular power cuts, internet outages, and worse disruption: a remake of its 2008 *Sherlock Holmes/HP Lovecraft* mash-up.

The surprise, then, is that the resulting game doesn't feel troubled by its fast and difficult development. Far from a rushed retread of the original game, *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened* feels fully reimagined with care and polish, and the result is an impressive, modern detective game that will feel fresh for longtime fans, but also requires no nostalgia or knowledge of the original to enjoy.

It helps that it has a killer premise: iconic detective Sherlock Holmes taking on the strangeness of the Lovecraft mythos. The man who never stops digging and always finds a rational explanation meets a world where the more you investigate the more bizarre and horrifying the answers become, until you go mad for lack of any rationality at all. It's

an unstoppable force hitting an immovable object, and the resulting sparks make for not only a compelling story, but an interesting poke around Sherlock's own psyche – already a mind in some ways adrift from normal thinking, in Frogwares' interpretation.

You luxuriate in assembling the puzzle, feeling like a genius

CHAPTER TWO

The game starts out on the streets of London with a cheekily mundane mystery – who stole Sherlock's morning newspaper? – and unfolds into a grand conspiracy of

eldritch cults, profane rituals, and betentacled gods that sends Watson and Holmes off on a grand journey. Unlike the studio's previous *Sherlock Holmes* game, *Chapter One*, this is a linear adventure rather than an open world, but it has no lack of variety,

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sequel to *Sherlock Holmes: Chapter One* that sees the detective investigating the horror of the Lovecraft mythos

EXPECT TO PAY
\$62.99

DEVELOPER
Frogwares

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 9 5900X,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
Geforce RTX 3080

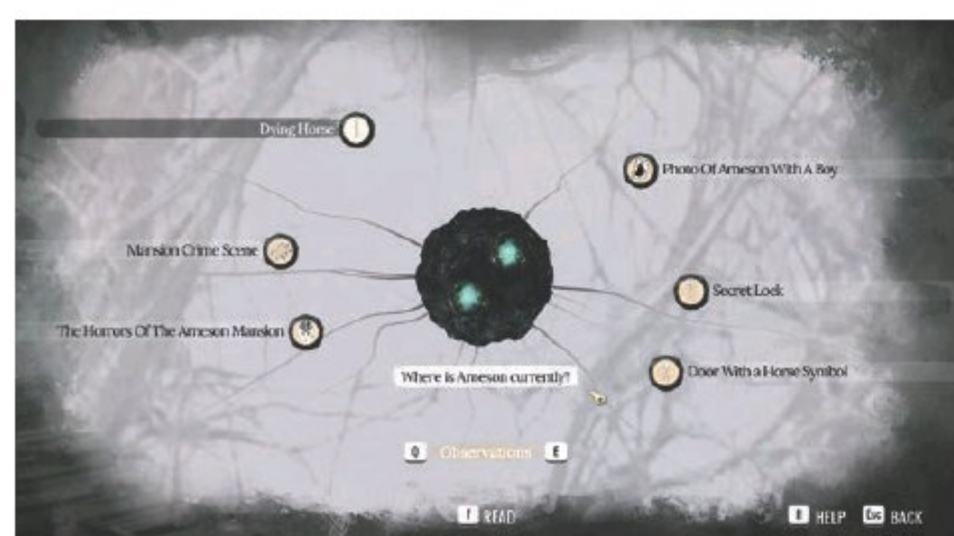
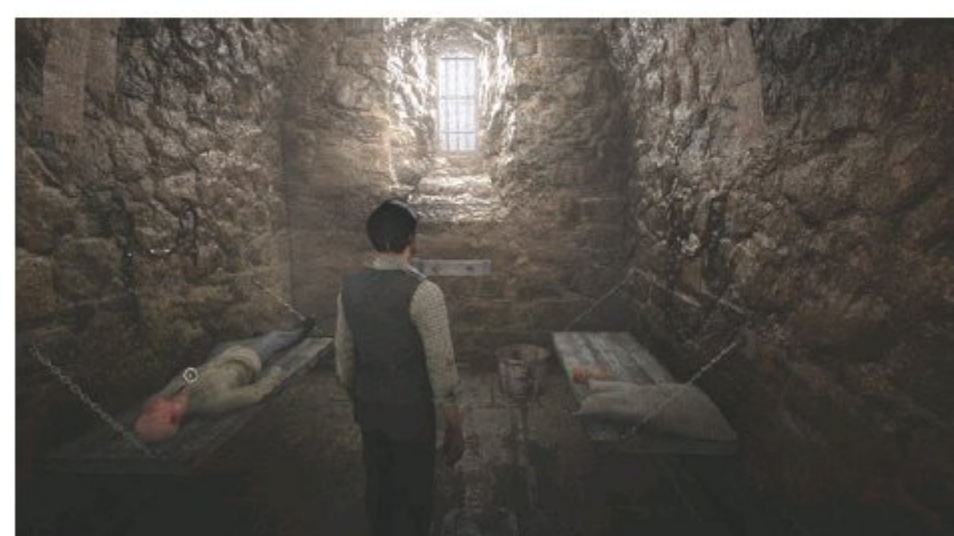
MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
sherlockholmes.one

taking you to a foreboding Swiss asylum, the sunny streets of New Orleans, crocodile-infested swamps, and much more.

Each location is a beautiful diorama, and holds its own variety of mysteries for you to solve. As Sherlock, and occasionally as Watson, your job is to collect clues and ultimately connect them into conclusions that will allow you to progress. The systems are largely ported over directly from *Chapter One* – presumably a choice made to save on both time and resources, but it works in the game's favour because they're still great mystery-solving mechanics.

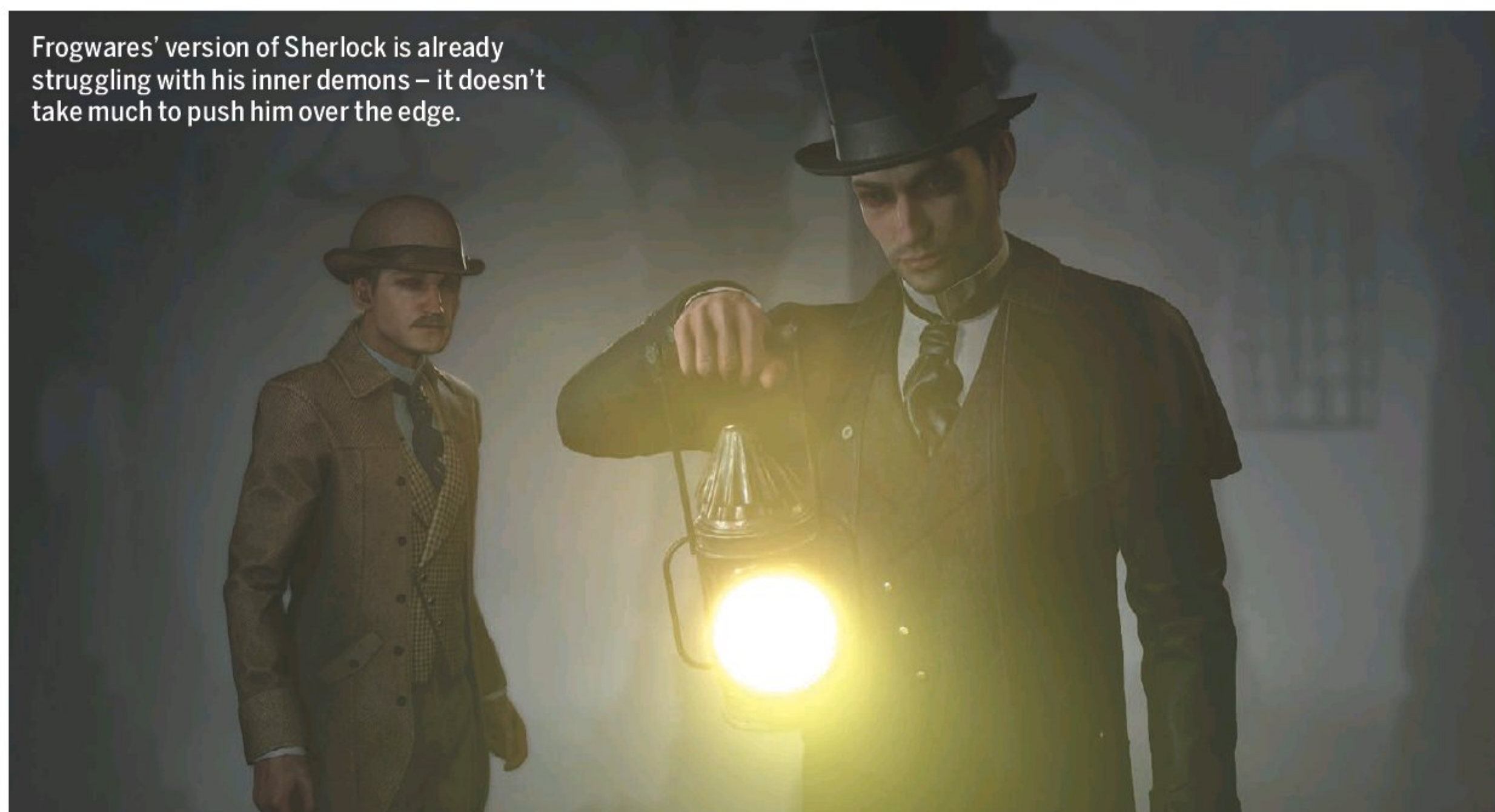
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Clues are recorded in your casebook for reference, and will be marked with icons suggesting how they might be expanded on or used to gain new clues. If you find a sketch of a person's face, for example, it might make sense to ask bystanders if they recognise them, or look them up in the archives, while a set of footprints can be followed back to their source to discover more evidence of who caused them.



ABOVE: All of Sherlock's abilities, including the mind palace where he finds connections, have suitably creepy new UI elements.

Frogwares' version of Sherlock is already struggling with his inner demons – it doesn't take much to push him over the edge.





TOP: The game is surprisingly beautiful, especially its environments and landscapes.



As you progress through a case, you unlock questions, which you can attempt to answer by connecting relevant clues. How did the victim die? Connect your description of his wounds with the nearby candlestick, and you may be one step closer to finding out if the butler did it. You can also visually reconstruct scenes, moving through the space placing ghostly representations to recreate past events, and interrogate, profile, and accuse suspects.

Altogether it's simple but elegant. The process of examining crime scenes, reading through evidence, and ultimately figuring out the connections between people, objects, and places strikes a wonderful balance – making you feel like you're doing real detective work without ever leaving you to flounder when you haven't made the right connection yet. As ever, Sherlock is the perfect avatar for this kind of play, because he's the man who can believably spot any clue and call on any piece of knowledge to explain it. He does the hard work of identifying what might be important and what it might mean, and you luxuriate in assembling the puzzle, feeling like a genius all the while.

If it has a flaw, it's that it's easily brute-forced – if you get a bit lazy, it's often possible to just bash together wrong answers until eventually you find the right one by process of elimination. But that does

The latest in haunted doll fashion. Head screws are very in this season.



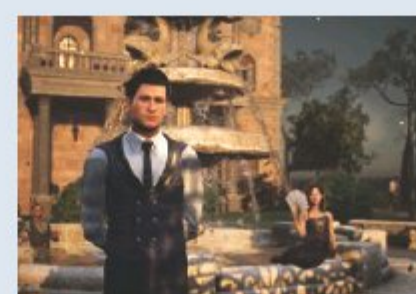
CHAPTER AND VERSE

The Awakened is a sequel to Chapter One – let me catch you up



ARRIVAL

A young Sherlock returned to his childhood home on the island of Cordona, with his confidant Jon, who is imaginary.



DISCOVERY

In the process of investigating local matters, he discovers buried truths about his family and unravels his own trauma.



CATHARSIS

He confronts the repressed memory of his mother's descent into madness and finally death, under a suspicious doctor's care.



BYE, JON

Having come to terms with his past, he lets go of his imaginary friend Jon. Back in London, he meets the real John Watson.



Watson bears an uncanny resemblance to Sherlock's imaginary friend Jon from the last game.



TOP: In the world of the mythos, nothing is so scary as a good book.

» feel like a small price to pay, because the flip side of it is that it's hard to get truly stuck – usually the bane of detective games. Outside of a couple of awkward puzzles, *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened* always keeps things moving gently along, giving it a slow but considered pace that never feels stodgy.

SLEUTH OR DARE

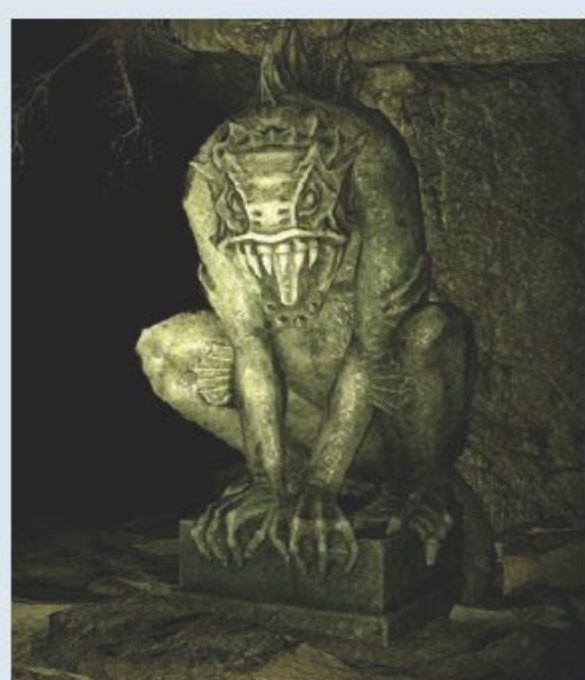
It's a pleasant surprise, too, how much the game simply focuses on that core experience. Previous games from Frogwares have attempted to mix in action sequences and combat for a more blockbuster feel, typically to poor result, while the original 2008 version of *The Awakened* is full of lengthy, awkward puzzles to accomplish simple tasks. There's almost none of that here, and it's welcome that the game sticks to what it's best at.

What it does do, however, is sometimes bend its clues system towards point-and-click-esque problem solving – for example, treating 'How do I sneak past this guard?' as a mystery to solve, with a solution involving combining unlikely items. These moments work well enough to move the plot forward without disrupting the flow of play, but they're undeniably less satisfying than simply dissecting a crime scene.

Something is definitely lost, too, in the move away from *Chapter One*'s open world structure. In the

CLUED IN

The game is full of references and Easter eggs



H.P. LOVECRAFT

Of course there are loads of references to Lovecraft's stories – including a statue of Dagon, one of Pickman's sinister paintings, and Herbert West's medical kit.



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

A sinister doctor called Gyax and a wealthy eccentric called Arneson reference Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, two of the creators of *Dungeons & Dragons*.



THE SINKING CITY

A familiar unlockable outfit allows you to dress up like the protagonist of *The Sinking City* – a past Frogwares game currently embroiled in a legal dispute.

circumstances it makes sense that *The Awakened* is scaled back to a more linear adventure, but it does mean losing some of its predecessor's most interesting mystery elements. Cases in *Chapter One* often tested your ability to navigate the city or follow a trail from one district to another, and travelling to the police archives or the city hall records to research a lead created a strong sense of place. The shift does allow for a greater variety of locales, however – while *Chapter One* was confined to one island, *The Awakened* is free to journey across the world.

The focus on clue hunting and mystery solving suits the Lovecraftian narrative down to the ground.

The Awakened is the rare game that uses the mythos as a source of subtle, building tension and atmosphere, instead of an excuse for tentacles bursting out of everything. A few hallucination sequences, in which you solve obtuse puzzles in a strange void, miss the mark by shining too close a light on the weirdness, but outside of those the game has a wonderful, creeping sense of dread. Human evil is always at the forefront, rather than cosmic monsters crawling out of portals, and the game is all the more unsettling for that – particularly in its bleak final confrontation.

It's only a shame that along with the Lovecraftian tropes comes one of the genre's frequent problems: an

insensitive and inaccurate portrayal of mental illness. The asylum sequence, though full of wonderfully creepy moments, at times wavers awkwardly between condemning the often barbaric psychiatric treatments of the time and depicting the inmates as zany comic relief or cheap fodder for scares. Though a brilliantly bizarre and memorable interrogation scene where Sherlock grills a patient via her hideous ventriloquist doll does go some way to making up for it.

FEAR FACTOR

Frogwares has always seemed to me to take a special pleasure in the grisly and occult. Even its more straight-

laced *Sherlock* games revel in moments of creepiness and strange occurrences. In *The Awakened*, you can practically see the developers' eyes twinkling every time you discover some grim new scene, and the

enthusiasm shows through in all sorts of creative moments.

And yet there's enough restraint to the discoveries they throw in Sherlock's path to just about keep it ambiguous whether truly supernatural forces are at work or not. Holmes' own deteriorating sanity and the cult's expertise with mind-bending substances offer just enough plausible deniability in the game's more surreal moments to allow players to draw their own conclusions – one last mystery where the solution is up to you, given a

satisfying pay-off either way in the game's final dialogue choices.

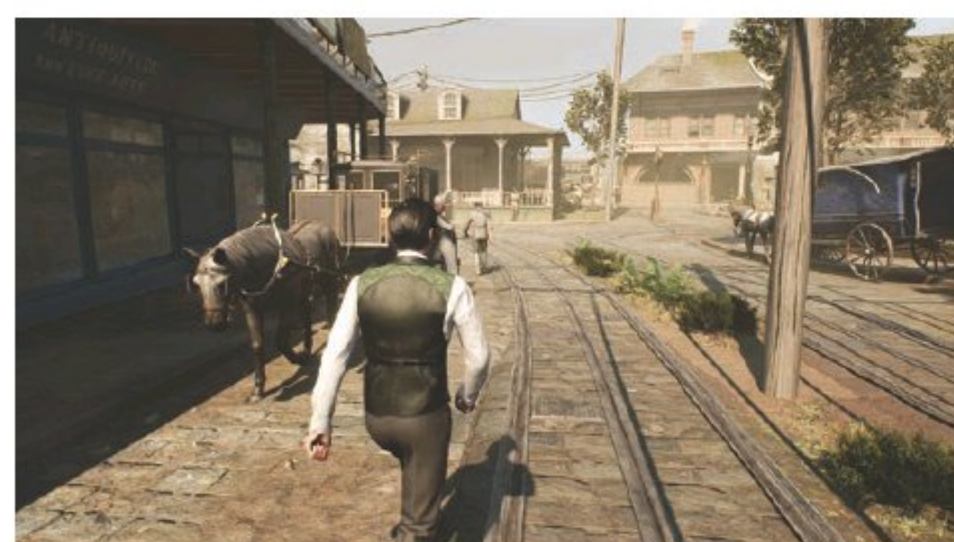
Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened is an impressive detective game by any metric. Factoring in that it was developed in an active war zone, it's a small miracle. Cleverly designed, atmospheric, and polished, the only sign it shows of being compromised by its circumstances is its short length. At about 12 hours, it did leave me wanting more, and perhaps more importantly it will feel slight for some compared to its \$63 launch price tag. It's hard to ignore that you can play more than twice that amount in *Chapter One* for the same price, and the fact that all the game's sidequests have to be bought separately as DLC leaves a bitter taste in the mouth.

But if you're happy to accept that as throwing a bit of financial support behind a developer fighting to keep doing what it does in impossible circumstances, your reward is some of the best work Frogwares has done yet. An opening message from the team describes *The Awakened* as "our own act of resilience against the chaos and horror the enemy tried to impose on our livelihood". This tale of a Victorian detective couldn't be a more unlikely form of defiance, but in its confident craftsmanship it stands testament to the extraordinary fortitude of its developer. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The Awakened is an enthralling adventure with an expert approach to both its detective work and its horror.

80



ABOVE: Yep, there's a lockpicking minigame. It's pretty straightforward, though, and happily makes only sparse appearances.



Vague maps without a player icon make it annoyingly easy to get lost, despite the relatively small areas.

SKIN DEEP

DEAD ISLAND 2 is a crash corpse in designing a game with no backbone

By Lewis Parker

Roughly ten hours into my playthrough of *Dead Island 2*, I started to wonder if there was much point in continuing. I kept waiting for the game to introduce some new gameplay mechanic or narrative surprise that would keep me invested, or at the very least give me some kind of reason to keep going. After ten more hours, I was certain; if I wasn't playing this game for review, I'd have stopped playing long before its conclusion.

My biggest problem with *Dead Island 2* is its gameplay loop, which isn't so much a loop as it is a flat circle. Get weapons, kill zombies, break weapons, get more weapons – rinse and repeat. It might sound like a dismissive way to criticise a game, but in *Dead Island 2*'s case the issue is that there's nothing outside of this loop to make engaging with it worthwhile. The game doesn't have an open world as many may be expecting – instead the map is segmented into ten different locations that you can (eventually) fast travel between. Once you've completed the relatively short main story and mopped up the remaining side quests, all that's left to do is travel to one of these areas and kill

infinitely respawning zombies until you either quit or die of boredom. Is killing zombies fun, at least? Yes – at first. At the start of the game, all you have are a few key skills and

access to some basic melee weapons. This is the part of *Dead Island 2* I had the most fun with, as I spent the majority of my time messing around with the FLESH system. Almost every body part

a zombie has can be hacked off in a visceral and dynamic fashion, allowing you to cut off a zombie's leg at a specific point or pop out an eyeball with a well placed bonk to the head.

As the story progresses, this novelty quickly begins to wear off. Sending a zombie and its jawbone flying in two separate directions

Almost every body part a zombie has can be hacked off

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A melee-focused action game set in a zombie infested Los Angeles

EXPECT TO PAY
\$89.95

DEVELOPER
Dambuster Studios

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

REVIEWED ON
Core i7-7820X, 16GB RAM, RTX 2060 Super, and Ryzen 9 5900X, 64GB RAM, RTX 4080

MULTIPLAYER
Yes
LINK
deadisland.com

admittedly never gets old, but the additions to the combat that follow do little to spice up the action. Cards you unlock allow you to buff certain skills, like your dodge or your jump kick, and you can unlock Curveball throwables to help thin out the horde, but these upgrades aren't substantial enough to offer any real variety.

This is probably a good time to mention that *Dead Island 2* doesn't have any form of difficulty settings. While not every game needs adjustable difficulty, *Dead Island 2* certainly feels like it could have used some – not because it's too hard, necessarily, but rather because it's so inconsistent. The first third of the campaign is relatively challenging, and I found myself constantly burning through all of my melee weapons and scrounging the environment for health items on a regular basis. Then I unlocked guns, and the difficulty became a joke.

Although you'll never have enough ammo on you to burn through an entire area of the map without having to resupply, they do allow you to pop the limbs off basic zombies with a single shot and deal critical damage to boss enemies at a safe distance. Pair that with your skill buffs and your Curveballs, and you can easily become untouchable. *Dead Island 2* attempts to balance this by spawning more and more boss enemies on the map and in the main story missions as you progress, but all that serves to do is pad out the game's length with a load of very spongy health bars.

Your first encounters with each of these special enemies can be pretty fun, but they're immediately recycled into standard encounters scattered throughout the map. The first time I fought one of the hulking Crushers, it was straightforward but enjoyable. As you make your way through a wedding venue, you run into a bride-to-be turned zombie, and have to fend her off as slow, romantic

STAR-STUDDED CAST

Four of *Dead Island 2*'s six playable characters



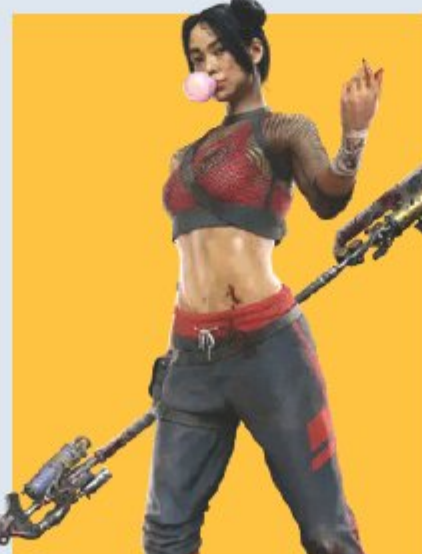
CARLA

A mechanic who specialises in taking on multiple zombies at once and tanking damage. Also apparently "hates being bored".



RYAN

Contrary to his appearance, Ryan was a stripper and not a fireman before the outbreak. Just wants to be reunited with his lost brother.



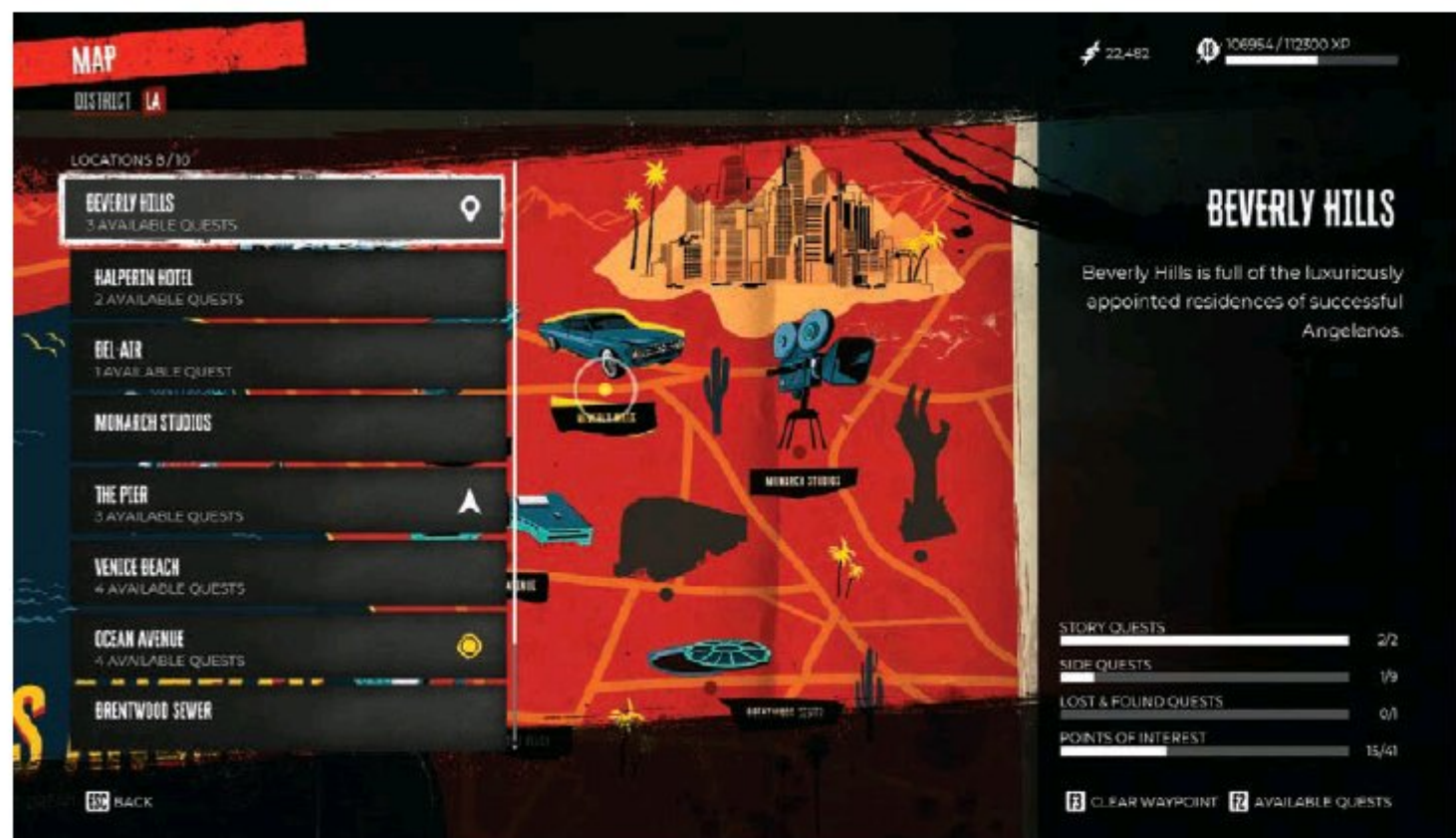
AMY

A Paralympian who really, really just wants to make it big, undeterred by the fact that there's an ongoing zombie outbreak occurring.



JACOB

Painfully British caricature of an East End London bloke. Loves saying "bruv". Probably knows all the words to Mary Poppins songs.



LEFT: Spoiler alert: it isn't playable. Sorry folks.

BELOW: The FLESH system in action.



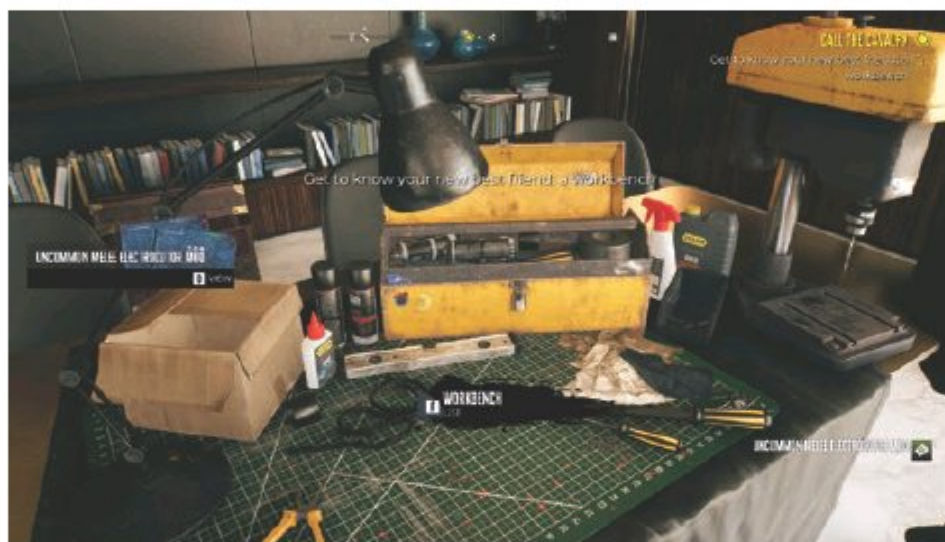


Characters with motivations about as deep as a puddle.



RIGHT: Potentially the most well written character in the game.

BELOW: Still running smoothly at 60fps.



» music plays in the background. Dodging the brute's slow, telegraphed attacks and timing jumps correctly to avoid her ground slams made for a pretty memorable and funny set piece; one that was instantly soured when I walked outside and ran into another Crusher roughly two minutes after completing the story mission.

DEAD LINES

Dead Island 2's weakest element, however, is its shambling story. You spend the whole of the short campaign finding flimsy narrative excuses to visit each different section of LA, constantly being introduced to new, disposable characters who stop being relevant the second the plot transitions you into a new area. Most of these characters are written to be annoying in a cheeky nudge-nudge, wink-wink sort of way, with washed up actors and LA socialites forming the majority of the cast. Yet at no point is the writing ever funny or witty enough to elevate these characters beyond their base concepts, and it's certainly never clever enough to play it off as satire.

It's also sort of difficult to tell when exactly some jokes are intentionally terrible, in a B-movie kind of way, and when they're simply poorly written. Over half way through the main story, you're introduced to sKOpe – an Amazon Alexa-style device involved in a sidequest to track down other sKOpe throughout the map. It might have been funny when my character made a point of speaking in a monotone voice just so the sKOpe could recognise her – if I hadn't been prompted on three separate occasions beforehand by an in-game advertisement to connect an Amazon Alexa to *Dead Island 2* so I could use it for voice commands. Is this a cheeky send-up of its own co-marketing deal, or just an awkward attempt to lampshade it?

It's not all bad – a few of the side quests did manage to coax a couple of laughs out of me, even if they were few and far between. The sidequests in general feel a lot more flavourful than anything the main story had to offer, as they tend to lean into more absurd characters for their humour and rarely veer into the kind of

mishandled seriousness and drama the main story is prone to.

As for the actual content of those story missions, I honestly cannot think of the last time I played through a campaign with design choices this uninspired. The amount of times I was tasked with finding a battery to repair a circuit breaker or

fixing the pressure sensors on some pipes is frankly embarrassing. Worse still, your character will joke about how often they're tasked with solving the same monotonous puzzles to progress. I'm sure

it's supposed to come across as some kind of cute, self-aware moment from the devs, but instead it only served to annoy me further. If you know your puzzles suck, why are you forcing me to play them?

DEAD-ICATED GRAPHICS

I played through *Dead Island 2* on two separate builds, one that was relatively high-end (Ryzen 9 5900X, RTX 4080, 64GB RAM) and another that was a bit more modest (i7-7820X, RTX 2060 Super, 16GB RAM), and both generally ran pretty smoothly. In fact, even the more modest build managed to run the game with all settings on Ultra – with only minor FPS drops

compared to its beefier counterpart. Both the button mapping and graphical settings are relatively robust too, which is handy considering how high the motion blur is set to by default.

Regardless of which build I ran the game on, I did run into some pretty hefty fps drops during certain set pieces in the main story. One particular segment, in which you fight through an army checkpoint, caused my fps to dip into the 30s (most likely due to the amount of zombies on screen). One area in the game, Beverly Hills, also had an odd problem that caused the game to drop down to 20fps any time I closed a menu, although thankfully that could be fixed by simply reopening and reclosing it. These issues seemed to be the exception rather than the rule however, as from what I tested, the game seems to run extremely well even on relatively dated hardware – something that was a bit of a relief given the recent uptick in poorly optimised PC ports.

I also ran into a few general bugs, some of which were pretty minor (such as resources falling through the terrain before I could pick them up, and odd collision detection on certain objects throwing me halfway across the map) and others which were more major (like when I clipped inside of a wall during a cinematic attack, or when certain quests refused to advance). I never ran into anything game breaking or progress-halting that couldn't be fixed with a simple reload however, and *Dead Island 2's* relatively generous checkpoints and autosaves meant that I barely lost more than a couple of minutes of progress at any given time.

Apart from the admittedly impressive technical performance, it's hard to find much reason to recommend *Dead Island 2*. Although the combat feels responsive and intuitive, it sadly does little to compensate for the game's numerous shortfalls – especially when said gameplay barely evolves throughout the game's 20-hour campaign. ■

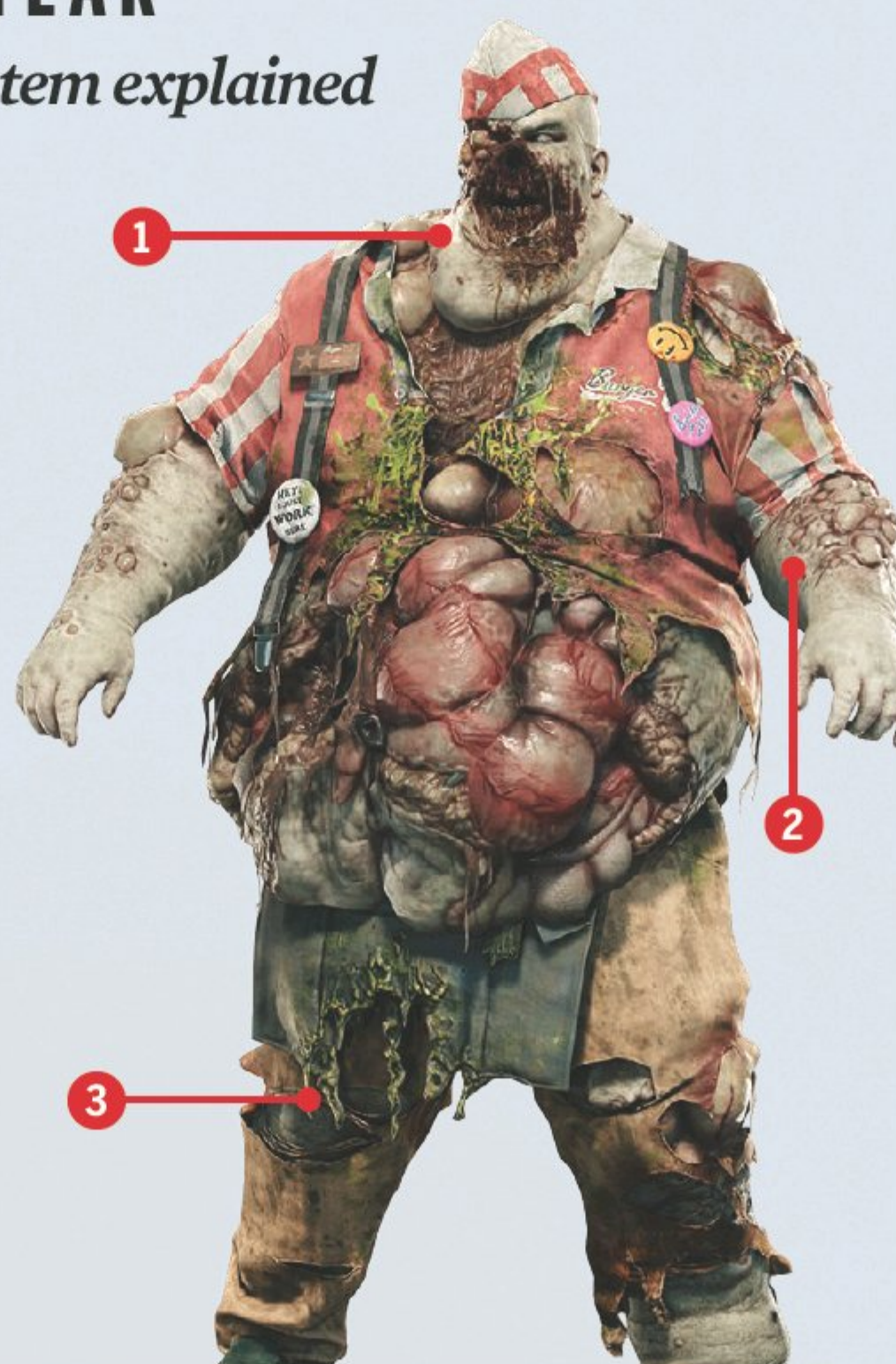
RIP AND TEAR

The flesh system explained

1 HEAD
Hitting a zombie in the head is the most ideal, and satisfying, way to deal damage (and remove jawbones).

2 ARMS
Taking off a zombie's arms is a great way to stop them from getting in close for a friendly hug.

3 LEGS
Shooting off a zombie's leg is the best way to immobilise them quickly and get some breathing room.



PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Dead Island 2 is hampered by dull design choices, repetitive combat and a painfully weak story.

55

WONDROUS

AGE OF WONDERS 4 makes conquering worlds with magic a joy

By Fraser Brown

Magic is rarely wondrous in its frequent videogame appearances. It harms, it heals and if you're lucky it maybe transforms enemies into sheep or frogs. Not so in *Age of Wonders 4* where it drives every component of this arcane 4X, transforming worlds, cities and the creatures that inhabit them. With your expansive collection of magical tomes, you can dabble with god-like powers to your heart's content.

Age of Wonders 4's structure should be familiar: you start with a single city, erect new buildings, develop the surrounding provinces, recruit armies and explore the map to find treasure and new enemies. Resources like food, gold and mana must be managed, rival rulers can be engaged diplomatically or aggressively, and eventually you'll start working towards one of the victory conditions, perhaps focusing on magic, or maybe just conquering everyone.

But the latest game in this long-running series is still distinct from both its forebears. It makes this clear right away, when you pick the foundations of your magical empire. First, there's the map. There's an abundance of premade maps,

including ones that are part of the story-driven campaign, but you can also spawn your own, selecting its traits. Maybe you want to conquer a frozen wasteland full of monsters, or a fiery hellscape split up by a molten sea, where the only safe route across is underground.

There's no dearth of compelling choices here, letting you make all sorts of exotic battlefields.

Maybe you want to conquer a wasteland full of monsters

EMPIRE BUILDER

It's in the creation of your prospective empire where things get really interesting, though. By selecting the physical form, traits, cultural leanings and societal quirks of your people, you're able to create all sorts of unusual empires, from sinister mole-people with a penchant for

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A fantasy 4X with a fantastic magic system

EXPECT TO PAY
\$69.95

DEVELOPER
Triumph Studios

PUBLISHER
Paradox Interactive

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-8086K, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 1080Ti

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
paradoxinteractive.com/games/age-of-wonders-4

cannibalism to industrious goblins who just want to build epic cities and make new friends. Through these choices you'll determine your empire's starting bonuses, alignment and magical affinities, establishing how you'll influence the world.

Nearly as important is the creation of your ruler. If you pick a mortal champion it will be from the same species you just created, while Wizard Kings can be from any species. Initially you're just selecting their physical appearance and starting weapons, but over the course of the game you'll find plenty of new gear and XP to bolster their power. Rulers, and the heroes you'll recruit later, represent the most powerful units in the game, and while they can benefit your empire by governing cities, where they really shine is in the tactical battles.

The early turns can be a bit repetitive, but the creation process still ensures that you'll start with a well-defined empire and thus some clear goals in mind. If you've crafted an empire of evil doers who use soul magic, for instance, you'll want to start getting into fights quickly, stealing enemy souls to fuel an



ABOVE: Things can get heated very quickly.



The maps are aggressively pretty.



TOP: Don't expect to go sailing over molten oceans – but maybe you can go underneath.

undead army. Your goal might be to transform your empire's citizens into undead monstrosities themselves. That's what *Age of Wonders 4* calls a "major transformation" – one of several ways you can enhance your empire's denizens.

Instead of a conventional research system, *Age of Wonders 4* doles out tomes of magic, each containing a variety of spells. Tomes are connected to the game's cosmic affinities, like order, chaos, nature and so on. By researching spells from these tomes, and unlocking new tomes, you'll rather quickly find yourself with a rich bounty of city enhancements, summons, transformations and enchantments, as well as all sorts of defensive and offensive spells. The impact these spells can have is gargantuan, especially when working in tandem. If you've transformed your species so that it's faster when travelling through forests, for instance, then you'll definitely want to select the spell that lets you create new forests, transforming the land itself so that you can better traverse it.

TAKE A HINT

One thing that might rankle micromanagement fans is how streamlined this is compared to *Age of Wonders: Planetfall*, where every unit had a bunch of mod slots that let you enhance them at an individual level. *Age of Wonders 4*'s

This frog means business.



ARCANE EVOLUTION

How magic can transform your armies



SPELLS
Nestled inside tomes are spells that can physically and mechanically evolve your race.



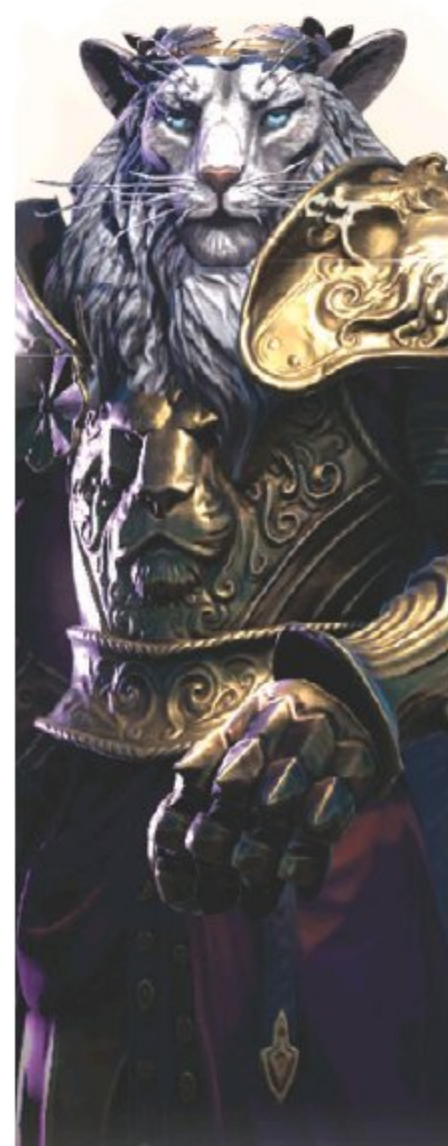
ELEMENTAL EFFECTS
Enchant weapons with elemental effects, making them more effective.



ASTRAL ARMY
Turn them into an astral army who can walk through walls – sneaky and handy for sieges!



UNDEAD RATS
And who can say no to immortal, undead rats who feed on the life force of their enemies?





» transformations and enhancements are much broader, so that moment to moment you're making much more dramatic changes. Both systems have their strengths and weaknesses, but there's so much that's already going on in *Age of Wonders 4* that I found I appreciated the ability to make sweeping changes to my entire empire at the click of a button.

The result is a more approachable *Age of Wonders*, but it should be noted that streamlining is not the only way that Triumph has achieved this. There's the helpful nested tooltips, a codex and a hint system that should make your life easier, but also mechanical improvements. Take your cities, for example. In *Age of Wonders 3*, you'd need to make a choice between recruiting units and constructing buildings, but here you can do both simultaneously thanks to the separate queues. Without the need to prioritise, you might expect to run out of stuff to build and recruit quite quickly, but the frequency with which you'll unlock new units, and the wide range of construction projects, which in turn unlock even more projects, mean that you'll have plenty to keep you occupied.

Plenty of complexity remains, too. City borders can be pushed out by annexing provinces and developing improvements on top of them. At first it's straightforward: if you need more food to grow your population, you'll want to build some farms. If you're

TOP: There's another world beneath the surface of the map.

ABOVE: Who doesn't want to conquer the world with a rat army?

YOUR NEXT WEIRD 4X

Looking for more unusual 4X games?



AGE OF WONDERS: PLANETFALL
Triumph's last game took the AoW formula to space and features plenty of exotic factions and great unit customisation.



ENDLESS LEGEND
Amplitude's greatest 4X contains faction design at its best, where each is an elaborate and singular superpower overflowing with unique mechanics.



SINS OF A SOLAR EMPIRE
Part 4X, part RTS, *Sins* is a unique strategy romp that still features some of the best battles around. And a sequel is finally on its way.



ALPHA CENTAURI
Firaxis' first sci-fi 4X has yet to be outdone, even after all these years. Phenomenal faction design, a cracking story and so much personality.



near a gold deposit and need to fatten your bank account, build a gold mine. But to take advantage of these provinces you'll need to make sure they aren't occupied by monsters. And you've got your rivals to worry about. Annex a province that they've got a claim on and they'll get a grievance against you, which can be used as an impetus for war.

You'll never have to look far for a fight, with most maps bursting with monsters, even if you're playing nice with your rival champions and Wizard Kings. The UI, which is excellent across the board, is especially helpful when you're preparing for a brawl, as hovering over an enemy will show you exactly who will be involved and what outcome is expected. You can auto resolve every fight, but if it doesn't go your way, you can try again with manual control without reloading.

MAPS AND MAGIC

When you're ready to get into the thick of things yourself, you'll be transported to a tactical map that reflects the area you're fighting in. Sometimes this means an ancient ruin or some rocky terrain full of cover and chokepoints, but too often I found myself duking it out in a mostly open area. *Planetfall*'s maps definitely seemed more tactically nuanced. Even the more open maps have environmental hazards and other points of interest, however, and

the fights themselves have a lot going for them, as magic and monsters and special world traits collide to create lively conflicts where you need to parse a lot of information to succeed. There's a lot to take in as you try to figure out what each effect actually does, and then reconsider your plans in an attempt to counter them.

Sieges, meanwhile, involve an extra layer, where the defender can utilise a variety of fortifications and tricks to win the day, while the attacker can undermine them by spending resources on siege projects prior to the battle. And depending on how you've built your species, you might be able to overcome some of

these obstacles. If your army has evolved into angelic beings they can fly over walls, while astral armies can pass through them.

Outside of battle, there's always something stopping you from leaving the

game or hitting End Turn over and over again. Maybe you'll be approached by some citizens who want your advice, potentially netting you rewards, an alignment change or giving your species a new trait. Another ruler might get in touch with a quest, sending you off on an adventure to some unexplored place. Or it could be as simple as an army you're about to attack deciding that you're way too tough for them, letting you decide their fate without a fight. Maybe you'll recruit them to work in one of your cities, or join your army.

If your army has evolved into angelic beings they can fly over walls

Through these events a narrative forms: the story of your empire.

AoW4 also has a more explicit story, told through five missions. It's conventional stuff, with two groups of Wizard Kings fighting over ancient power, but the missions themselves offer engaging objectives and special features that make them worth it.

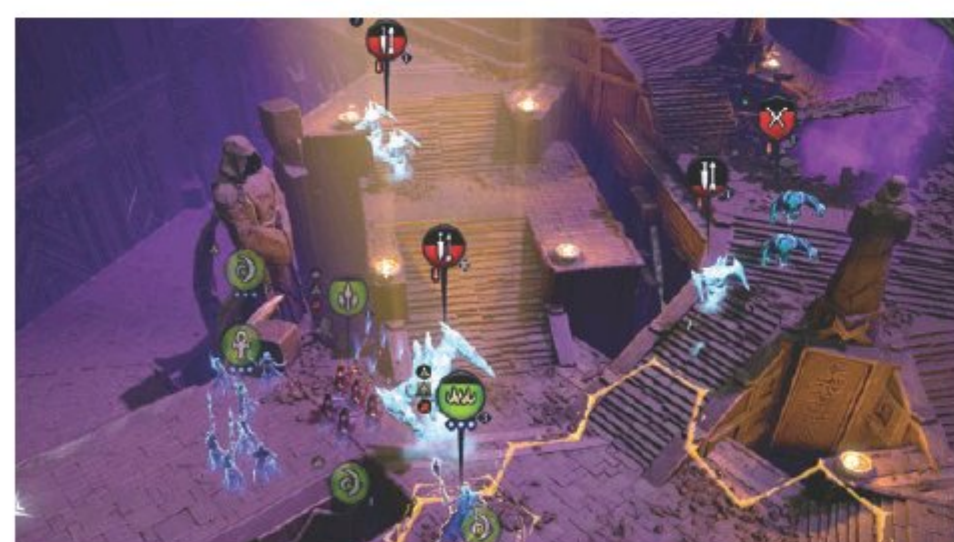
With all the ways you can develop your empire, *Age of Wonders 4* demands to be played over and over. But there's also an overarching progression system, the Pantheon, that encourages you to hop back in. Founding cities, forging alliances, completing quests and countless more activities will net you Pantheon XP, which in turn unlocks points that can be spent on the Pantheon tree. Rewards include new cosmetics, icons and gear, which can be used in your next game. Meanwhile, rulers you've created can join the Pantheon, allowing them to appear in future games as friends or adversaries.

Age of Wonders 4 scratches my itch for experimentation like few other strategy games, seducing me back to drag my empire in new directions. And every time, I return with a sack full of anecdotes, like the time I resurrected a rival who had been plaguing me all game as an undead minion. Magic just makes everything more fun. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

Age of Wonders 4 is flavourful and inventive 4X full of incredible spells and engaging empire management.

87



ABOVE: Sometimes you just want everyone to know you're a bad dude.





APRIL FOOL'S SLAY

Less jumping in **THE MURDER OF SONIC THE HEDGEHOG**

Sonic has been murdered – well, not really – and it's up to Tails, I guess, to finger the suspect from a cast of his anthropomorphic mates. There's Amy and Knuckles – you've probably heard of them. There's the infamously edgy Shadow, here without his trademark arsenal of guns. And while I don't know the others, I like them after playing this. This is an affectionate visual novel that redeems an oft-maligned band of mascots.

It's also, of course, a joke game – an exceedingly polished one – released on April 1, for free, on Steam. Set aboard a luxury train where Amy Rose has organised a murder mystery party, you have to solve the murder of Sonic the Hedgehog – who has really been attacked and rendered unconscious – by examining clues in each train carriage, and interrogating such suspects as Knuckles and Rouge the Bat.

While there has been no actual murder, this is still a tightly designed mystery complete with maps and alibis that need to be rigorously checked. You can pick the wrong dialogue options, but with no real consequences, as Tails the Great Detective will just gently correct you. Nevertheless, you still feel involved in

the story, because you're being asked for your opinion all along.

You, by the way, are a new employee on the train: an unknown in the *Sonic* series who is dragged along in the mystery as Tails' assistant. With various twists and turns, the story goes beyond what you would expect, to offer a full-fat Sonic adventure.

Why was Shadow going round locking all the doors?

was where when Sonic was 'murdered'. Could this person have moved outside their assigned carriage? And why was Shadow going round locking all the doors? I found the solution to the mystery fairly satisfying overall, even if it did feel brisk and underdeveloped.

ROBOT-NICKED

In terms of the mystery, it all boils down to who

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

A murder mystery visual novel starring Sonic, Tails, Knuckles and, er, the rest

EXPECT TO PAY

Free

DEVELOPER

Sega

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

Intel Core i7-10750H, 16GB RAM, GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER

No

LINK

bit.ly/MurderSonic

I wasn't sure what to expect from Sonic's menagerie of friends, but thankfully this is a game for everybody and not just die-hard fans. There are a few references that flew over my head, but nothing that comes at the expense of Sonic fans.

There is one element that I found increasingly grating: a mandatory minigame that crops up every time you're about to interrogate a suspect. Controlling Sonic on a scrolling, isometric playing field, you have to jump gaps and dodge traps as you try to gather a certain number of rings. It's harmless at first, but it becomes more difficult and frequent as the game barrels towards its climax.

But even that is something I can't legitimately moan about, as there are generous accessibility options to make this minigame much easier. It might be an April Fool's gag, but it's one that has been executed with a huge amount of aplomb. ■

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

The Murder of Sonic the Hedgehog is a fun, if slight, mystery made with genuine love for the world of Sonic.

80

BELOW: The best way to earn money is by completing fetch quests for NPCs.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Jimb Esser

LINK
bit.ly/UnchartedWanders

GOOD GRIDDANCE

Crawling for cash in **UNCHARTED WANDERS**

Created for this year's **Dungeon Crawler Jam**, *Uncharted Wanders* is in fact a game about dungeon crawling to turn a profit, as you lug goods from one town to another. They might only be minutes apart from each other, but monsters are a persistent hazard on the grid-based pathways.

Everything in the world is geared towards the trading business. The Ministry of Trade sells licences that determine how many hired hands you can bring with you, while the only things the shops sell are trading goods and exploration supplies. Mapping the dungeon is really a by-product as you shift table legs from Physopolis to Spiridon on the reverse journey. You will only earn a little profit each time, but eventually you can afford more mercenaries and be able to head further afield.

The traditional crawling experience has been ruthlessly streamlined here. Combat is automatic, as you step next to the enemy, with a trio of stats resolving combat in a deterministic way. There's no way to heal, other than to find a town, while the supplies are only used to mend broken bridges.

However, each time you return to the dungeon, most of your actions will be undone. Did you remember to bring enough supplies to complete your journey?

There's a lot of game here, far more than I've come to expect from a jam game. And I don't just mean the amount of content. *Uncharted Wanders* feels extraordinarily good to play, thanks to an easy-to-read interface, a satisfying game loop, and a delightful visual scrolling effect as you move around. ■

80

FAST AND FURIOUS

Hectic top-down survival action in **DRIFTR**

Driftr is a *Vampire Survivors*-like, meaning you'll be fending off waves of enemies and carefully curating a character build, as a timer ticks away. However, you're only being asked to survive for a piddly three minutes here. Child's play. No, I haven't managed it. *Driftr* is hard.

Where it differs from the rest of the genre is the nature of character movement. As if you're steering a car, you direct the plain white block protagonist by using the Left and Right arrow keys. The block will accelerate automatically, but you can also activate a hard-to-control boost by holding either key down.

You begin by simply dodging enemies, which is tricky enough, before the temporary green and yellow zones are introduced. Successfully steer into a green zone

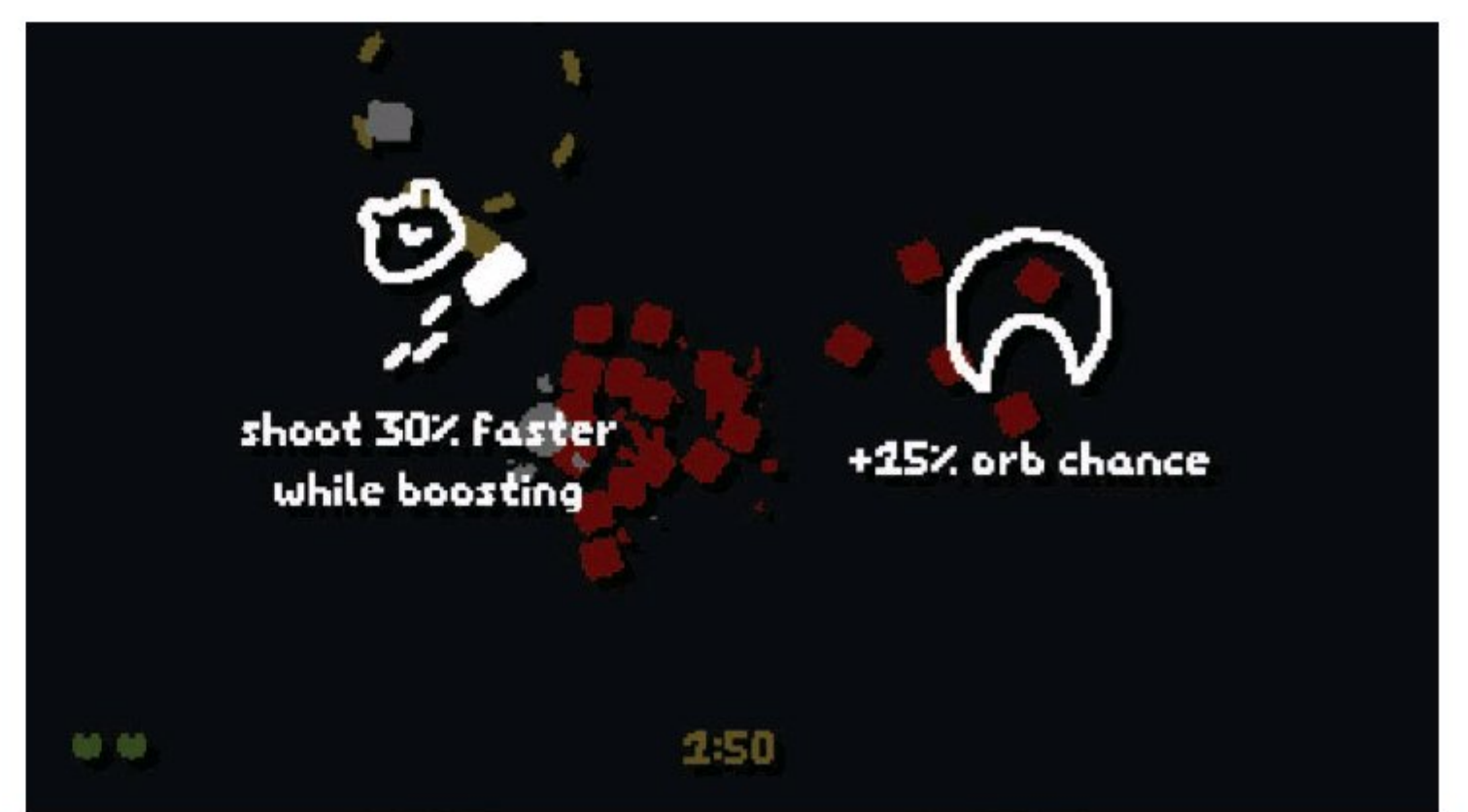
and you'll get a blob of health, while yellow ones will grant a choice of power-up. 'Better handling' felt essential, but you can also find abilities that trigger explosions as you get hurt. You're trying to combine complementary power-ups that will allow you to last the three minutes, or as long as you possibly can.

It is a novel experience, manoeuvring a constantly moving vehicle around an arena tightly packed with enemies, but I could not get to grips with the top-down steering. Moving relative to the vehicle, and not from my perspective, is a thing I just find flummoxing.

Still this will be an enjoyably brisk *Survivors*-like, with a minimalist aesthetic and a soundtrack that could be described as 'banging'. Even by genre standards it's a quick and cheap experience – free, in fact. ■

72

BELOW: You're the white block. Yellow blocks are bullets, red ones – enemies.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
kindanice

LINK
bit.ly/driftrGame

GROUP TEST

GAMING LAPTOPS

Pushing the boundaries
of gaming on the go

By Jacob Ridley



A new generation of GPUs has arrived and with them a new generation of gaming laptops. Some new designs, some a refresh of what came before. We've had heaps of RTX 40-series laptops in the PC

PowerPlay labs for a spin round our benchmarking suite to give them a run for their money. There are also new AMD 7000-series GPUs for laptops announced, but, alas, no gaming laptops made it across our desks with one installed in time for this test.





Legion Pro 7i

LENOVO \$4,090



Simply the best

1 This Lenovo Legion laptop is outstanding. Where other laptops try to squeeze in absurdly powerful RTX 4090 GPUs into a slim chassis with miserly results, Lenovo has opted for the much more sensible RTX 4080 here. But don't let that put you off. This laptop's excellent chassis will see it often outperform even those constrained RTX 4090 models at times. The Legion comes with a 1600p IPS screen rated to run at up to 240Hz. That's a tough target for most GPUs to hit, but the 150W RTX 4080 here manages to satiate that screen's refresh rate in many competitive

games and deliver upwards of 100fps in more demanding titles. That's down to the RTX 4080's Ada Lovelace silicon, and helped along by DLSS Frame Generation in supported games, but it's also down to a clever pick of CPU in the Legion with the Intel Core i9 13900HX. Stick that all together with 32GB of DDR5 RAM and a 1TB PCIe 4.0 SSD inside a grown-up chassis and the Lenovo stands out as the best gaming laptop right now.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- RTX 4080 at its best
- Excellent CPU
- Smart chassis

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I9 13900HX / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 4080 (150W) / RAM: 32GB DDR5-5600 / STORAGE: 1TB NVME SSD / SCREEN: 16-INCH, 1600P, 240HZ

G5 KF

GIGABYTE \$1,799



The affordable option

2 The latest generation of gaming laptops has made me rethink what an affordable machine is. Gone are the days of a chunky chassis with a no-frills feature set, and in their place you have a laptop like this Gigabyte G5. The G5 is cleverly designed for gaming without breaking the bank. The RTX 4060 at its core still benefits from Ada exclusive features like DLSS 3 and Frame Generation but importantly it's far from the lofty price tag of an RTX 4090. It's a great fit for the G5's 1080p, 144Hz screen, especially as Gigabyte is allowing the 75W RTX 4060 to ramp up to a respectable

2,100MHz. Though what I appreciate most about the G5 is just how easy it is to get under the hood and install a secondary M.2 SSD. There are a few screws to dispatch but then you can simply pop-off the rear panel and access the spare M.2 slot and RAM, if needed. I'd recommend the upgrade to a larger SSD as a priority, too, the included 512GB SSD is this laptop's weakest link. That and it's pretty loud.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- High 1080p frames
- Easy to upgrade storage
- Loud

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I5 12500H / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 4060 (75W) / RAM: 16GB DDR4 3200 / STORAGE: 512GB NVME SSD / SCREEN: 15.6-INCH, 1080P, 144HZ

A HULKING BEHEMOTH THAT CAN ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS A DESKTOP REPLACEMENT



GROUP TEST

4

Blade 16

RAZER \$7,999

Wowee pricey

3 The Razer Blade 16 is a gaming laptop we all understandably crave. It's stunning, well-provisioned, and hewn out of a chunk of shiny metal. It's decisively drool-worthy, but if you're looking for any sort of value proposition then look elsewhere.

Let's start with the great bits. Even inside its slender chassis, the Blade 16 packs an RTX 4090 capable of matching desktop machinery for framerates. We're talking about high framerate 4K gaming in a machine that looks like a MacBook from the dark side. Genuinely incredible. But, surprisingly, it's the 24-core CPU

that really ramps up under load, hitting a thermal ceiling quicker than you can say 'Razer toaster'.

And the promise of a native UHD+ screen that can moonlight as a faster FHD+ screen doesn't live up to expectations, and it's a bit too much of a hassle to make it a reasonable ask of gamers on-the-go.

All in, the Blade 16 is a beast of epic proportions, but it's tough to recommend this high-end spec at the price asked for it.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- As premium as it gets
- Desktop-grade performance
- Frightening price

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I9 13950HX / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 4090 (175W) / RAM: 32GB DDR5-5600 / STORAGE: 1TB + 1TB NVME SSD / SCREEN: 16-INCH, DUAL-MODE, 120/240HZ

Titan GT77 HX

MSI \$9,599

Performance, at what cost?

4 If you want the highest framerate out of a gaming laptop, the Titan GT77 will give you that. If you care about literally anything else – be it noise, power, price, or style – the Titan is not the laptop for you. Not even close.

The Titan is a hulking behemoth that can only be described as a desktop replacement. It's portable, but you wouldn't want to carry it around with you day-to-day. But it's sort of to be expected of a laptop that incorporates an RTX 4090 running at 175W alongside a Core i9 13950HX CPU. It comes with 64GB of DDR5 and

4TB of storage space, which conveys the sort of machine the Titan is. It's extreme. And while it's the quickest laptop we've tested, you're paying more than even Razer's RTX 4090-laden Blade 16. Out pricing Razer is quite a feat. Then there's the fact it's absurdly loud. MSI has put all the top parts into the Titan but there's been little more thought paid to the holistic laptop experience. It's just not much fun to use, really.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Top performance
- Roars under load
- Ludicrous price

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I9 13950HX / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 4090 (175W) / RAM: 64GB DDR5-4000 / STORAGE: 4TB NVME SSD / SCREEN: 17.3-INCH, 4K, 144HZ



5

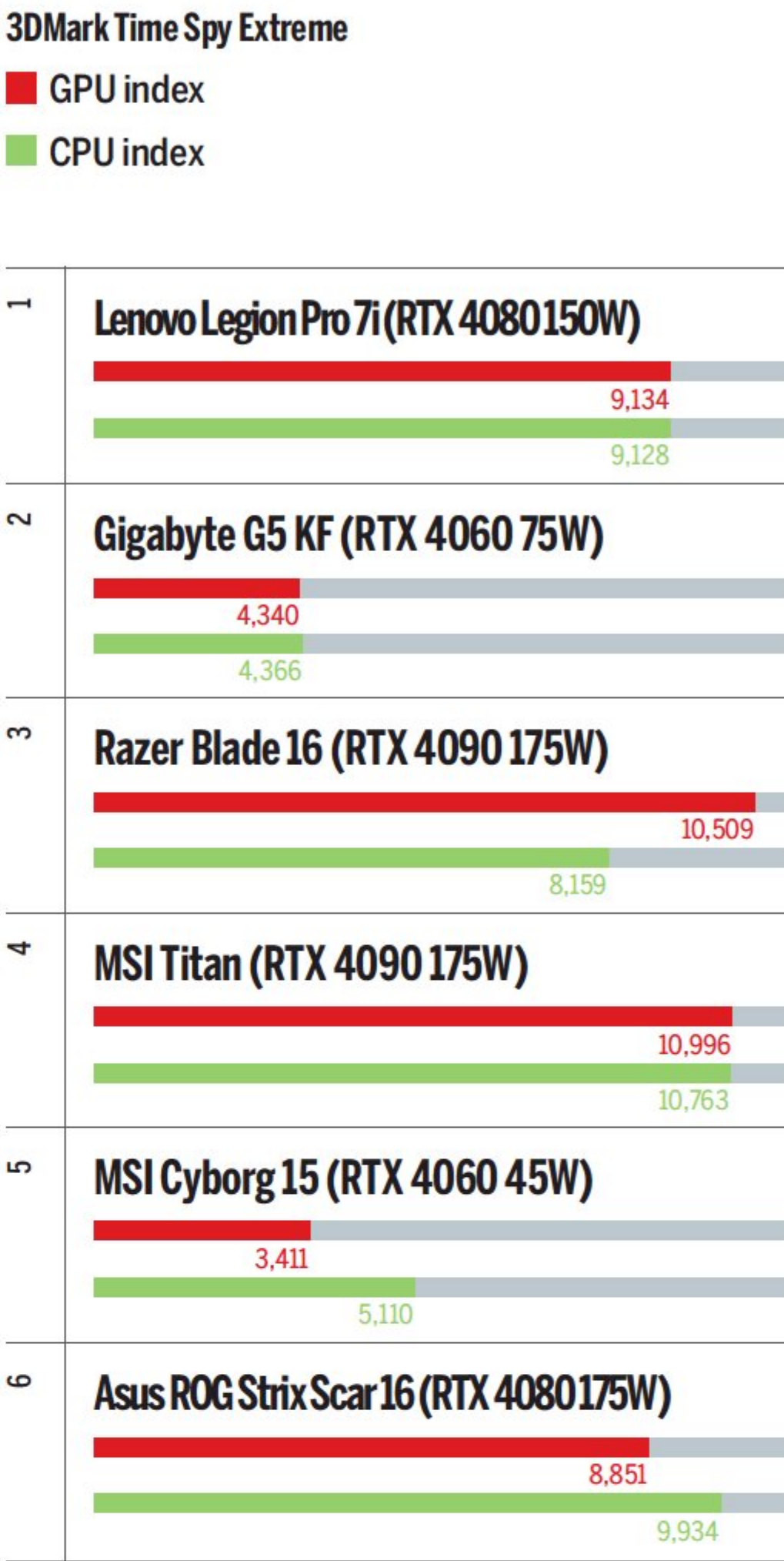
3



**THE MSI CYBORG IS A
LOVELY LOOKING MACHINE**



BENCHMARKS



Cyborg 15

MSI \$2,799

Sacrifices too much

5 The MSI Cyborg is a lovely looking machine. When I pulled it out of the box I had hoped its impressive specs list would see it rise to the top of the charts, too. But after some time using the Cyborg it's gone down in my estimations. This laptop does a lot to keep temperatures and noise in check – too much, in fact. The RTX 4060 within the Cyborg 15 runs at 45W, which is 30W lower than the Gigabyte G5's GPU. Because of that, the Cyborg falls majorly behind in terms of overall gaming performance across the board. And that's despite having a better processor at its core in the Core

i7-12650H and running in its maximum performance mode. The one upside of its low power operation is that it runs very quietly under load, but it's not like you can't turn down the G5 if noise matters that much to you. Plus the Cyborg only offers a single M.2 slot, which means upgrading the SSD would require copying the drive already in there somehow and then removing it from the machine entirely.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Quiet while gaming
- Held back while gaming
- No secondary M.2 slot

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I7 12650H / GPU: NVIDIA RTX 4060 (45W) / RAM: 16GB DDR5-4800 / STORAGE: 512GB NVME SSD / SCREEN: 15.6-INCH, 1080P, 144HZ

ROG Strix Scar 16

ASUS \$4,799

No holding back

6 The ROG Strix Scar 16 is a gorgeous machine. The RGB strip across the front and back gradates through the translucent edge plastic giving it an ethereal look in the dark. And it's powerful too. The numbers that the Intel Core i9-13980HX churns out in rendering benchmarks are tasty, with single-core performance that beats the Lenovo Legion Pro 7i's i9-13900HX by a good hundred points. In gaming, the RTX 4080 doesn't hold back with 175W to throw at today's top games, often hitting frame rates up to more confined RTX 4090-powered laptops.

All that power in a 16-inch laptop comes at a price, though. The CPU and GPU hit 105°C and 83°C respectively under load and there are some concerning noises coming from under the hood when you boot up a game. And while Nvidia's Optimus tech helps with in-game performance, switching between programs isn't as seamless as I'd like. It's been a little unresponsive actually and crashed just from me trying to open PCMark 10.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Funky design
- Great gaming performance
- Runs kinda hot

SPECS CPU: INTEL CORE I9 13980HX / GPU: NVIDIA GEFORCE RTX 4080 / RAM: 16GB DDR5-4800 / STORAGE: 1TB+1TB NVME SS / SCREEN: 16-INCH, 1600P, 240HZ



EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“I don’t find a Great Sword of Head Chopping +5 within the chest”

Re-rolling with the punches in **BALDUR’S GATE III EARLY ACCESS**

I’m on a rocky island surrounded by lava deep in an underground labyrinth in the Underdark and, while there’s a lava elemental stalking the vicinity, it’s the least of my worries.

That’s because I’ve found a locked chest on the island and, frustratingly, I’ve left Astarion, my vampiric, rogue, lockpicking master behind with the rest of my party. Instead, there’s just me, Natasha De Metrial, a half-elf fighter fumbling with the chest’s lock in the dark as lava laps at my heels.

How did I get into this sticky patch? Well, I’ve played enough RPGs to know that a solitary chest on a volcanic island in the middle of a lava field, guarded by lava elemental, and deep in the TPK-friendly Underdark, is absolutely worth

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Rolled a D20, didn’t like the result, so rolled it again.

ALSO PLAYED
Cyberpunk 2077, Fallout 2

checking out. I mean, it’s gotta have something good in it, right?

Also, I’ve very much learned to roll with the ability score check punches in *Baldur’s Gate III*. This is a game that, admittedly right now in Early Access, seems totally geared towards an ‘ah, what the hell’ attitude when it comes to rolling against ability checks, even if they aren’t your character’s strong suit.

ROLLIN’ WITH MY HOMIES

I started *BGIII* mistakenly thinking that I shouldn’t attempt these rolls

TOP: The ghost of the mad monk was totally sus.

unless I could call upon a character with a natural aptitude toward them and/or class-based benefits to passing them. I mean, what terrible consequences would there be if I failed? But Larian Studios, leaning fully into the larks and japes vibe that most D&D sessions descend into, has seemingly set the majority of these check thresholds low. Most checks I’ve encountered require nothing more than a 10/20 pass, so even if you’re playing a character with no benefits to add on, you’ve still got a really respectable chance of passing. And that’s not even factoring in if you have any ‘Inspiration’ banked (allows

WHAT TERRIBLE CONSEQUENCES WOULD THERE BE IF I FAILED?

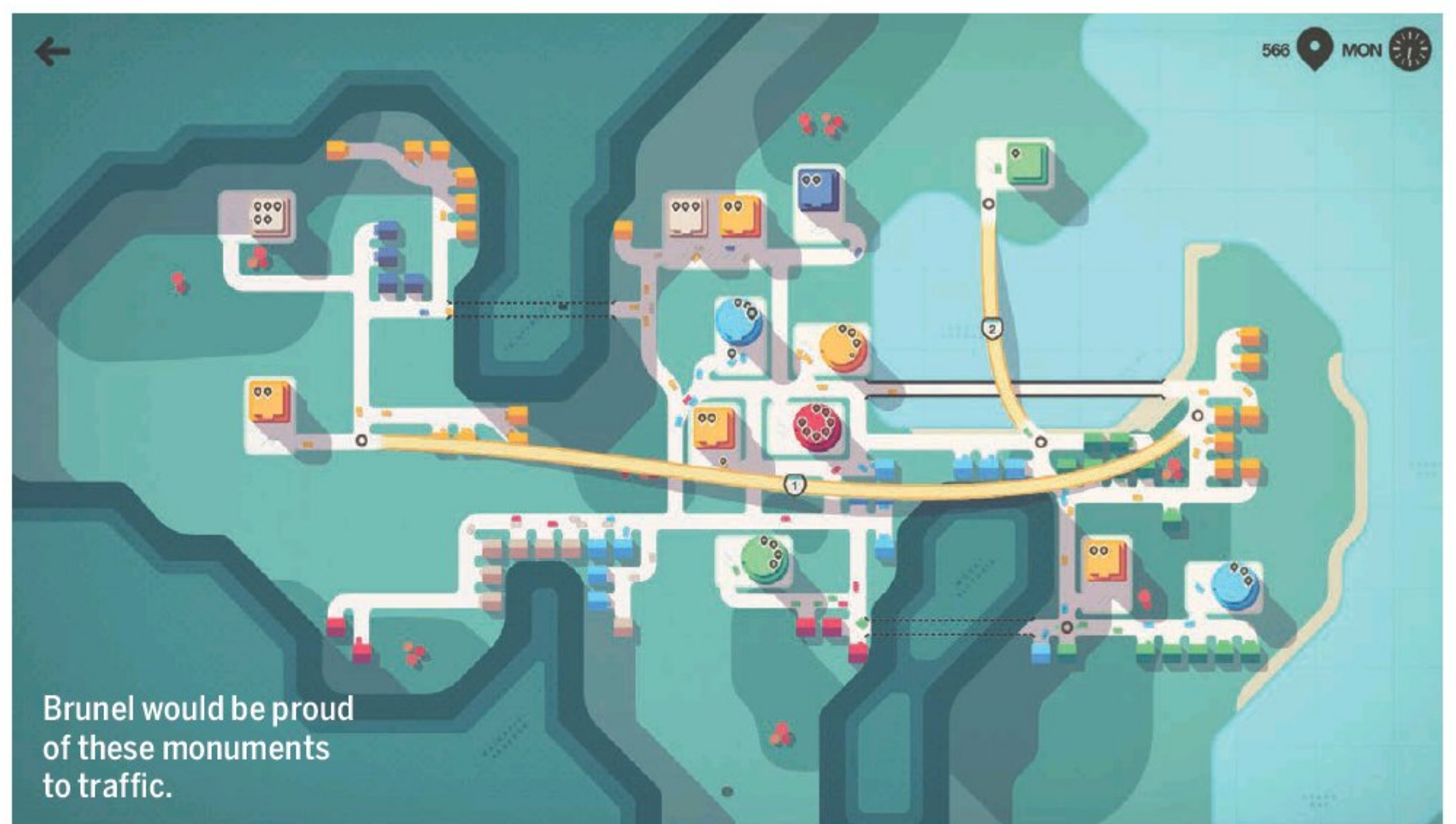


A glowing, possessed amulet. What could go wrong?

you to re-roll on fail), which handily stacks in *Baldur's Gate III*.

So, back to the chest. I fail the first and second attempts to open its lock, but two of my five banked Inspirations means I succeed on the third. I'm a bit put out at first as I don't find a Great Sword of Head Chopping +5 within the chest, as I had desired, but instead just an amulet. But upon picking said amulet up I find myself making more checks to stop myself from, disturbingly, laughing uncontrollably. With visions of a lava elemental smashing my guffawing mug in, I roll the dice.

Luckily I pass these checks, and from the amulet springs the ghost of a mad monk. The monk is not very forthcoming about how he got bound into the amulet (totally sus!) but says he wants to be taken to his granddaughter. I burn a bit more Inspiration to decipher that the amulet has an icon of the deity Lathander on it, though, pointing to complications. I don't need Inspiration to deduce this all smells more than a bit fishy, so I pocket the amulet rather than putting it on, and as my boots begin to burn I decide to dwell on the issue of the monk once I've got an ale in my hand at Baldur's Gate's Blushing Mermaid Inn. ■



Brunel would be proud of these monuments to traffic.

“The streams of traffic begin to clog”

The perils of town planning in **MINI MOTORWAYS**

▶ TOM CHARNOCK



THIS MONTH

Destroyed an ancient woodland with a JCB.

ALSO PLAYED

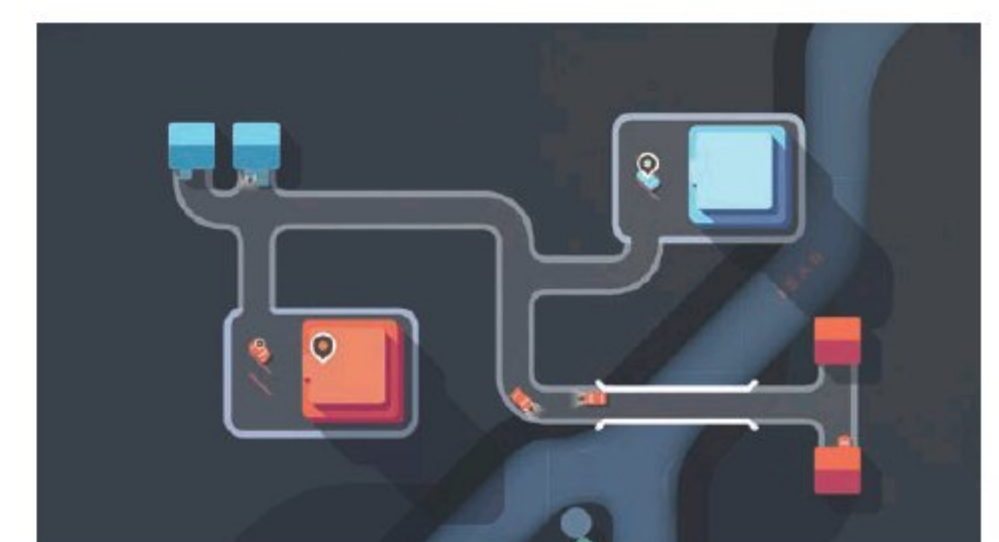
Bad North, *BallisticNG*

The real hero of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* isn't Arthur Dent, it's the man from the council, Mr L Prosser. You know, the guy who tries to convince Arthur that the bypass absolutely needs to be built directly through the field where his house is currently – and inconveniently – standing.

In a way, *Mini Motorways* is a Mr Prosser simulator. Here I am, smashing great stretches of asphalt through green and pleasant swathes of serene countryside so the citizens of my ever-growing conurbation can get their gas-guzzling SUVs to the local hypermarket to buy stuff they don't (presumably) need. As I lay yet another roundabout or gargantuan multi-laned highway with wanton abandon, my mind is cast back to childhood memories of *The Animals of Farthing Wood*; wildlife and idyllic pastures of tall grass and ancient woodlands obliterated by man's (my) unquenchable thirst for growth. More roads, more SUVs, more dwellings, and more hypermarkets of corresponding colours that must be frequented by a public with cash to spend.

VEHICULAR CHOLESTEROL

Of course, the minimalist nature of *Mini Motorways*' visuals means a lot of what you've just read is almost entirely the result of an over-active imagination, but as sure as night follows day – which it does, even in *Mini Motorways*' tiny world – adding more intersections and boulevards to my growing concrete jungle feeds these arterial roads with more and more vehicles, for they are the lifeblood of this sprawl. But then disaster strikes. The free-flowing streams of traffic begin to clog, like vehicular cholesterol. More hypermarkets spring up. Across the river a new housing development appears... but alas I have no bridge-building capacity, so consumers sit idle. Queues are forming in and around the carparks of my hypermarkets and produce piles up, rotting on the shelves as I try to build more roads to alleviate the congestion. Regrettably, I find that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and this is a technological breakdown. With the hypermarkets unable to shift stock, roads congested and the serene countryside all but devoured, my city has shut down. Oh well. ■



“Far too soon it starts throwing betentacled monsters at you”

Can **CALL OF CTHULHU** satisfy my unnatural hunger for the mythos?

After enjoying *Sherlock Holmes: The Awakened* so much this month (see my review on p72), my appetite was whetted for Lovecraftian horror. Hazily I remembered a game from a few years back with a pretty similar premise: *Call of Cthulhu*. Just as I had the thought, it popped up at a deep discount on Steam.

Call of Cthulhu, based on both Lovecraft's work and the board game, is a pretty classic mythos tale. A private detective is hired to investigate a death, travels to an isolated community to investigate, and finds himself drawn into bizarre events that sap his sanity.

So far, so good, and indeed the game makes a great first impression. My introduction to the crumbling fishing village of Darkwater is wonderfully grotesque and creepy – surly fishermen and threatening bootleggers making me feel anything but welcome, everything tinged a sickly green by overcast skies, a dead whale washed up on the beach, covered in unexplainable wounds.

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Stared into the void, and gained 5 XP.

ALSO PLAYED
The Murder of Sonic the Hedgehog, *Wildfrost*

But what so many Lovecraftian videogames are bad at is knowing when and how far to ramp up the weirdness, and *Call of Cthulhu* is no exception. Far too soon it starts throwing betentacled monsters at you, showing them in intense close-ups that destroy any sense of mystique – and you just can't come back from that.

MONSTER MUSH

I won't claim the original stories are all subtlety and nuance – let's not forget that in Cthulhu's first literary appearance, he's defeated by the

protagonist ramming a boat into his head – but the mythos is always most effective in games when it's used with some restraint.

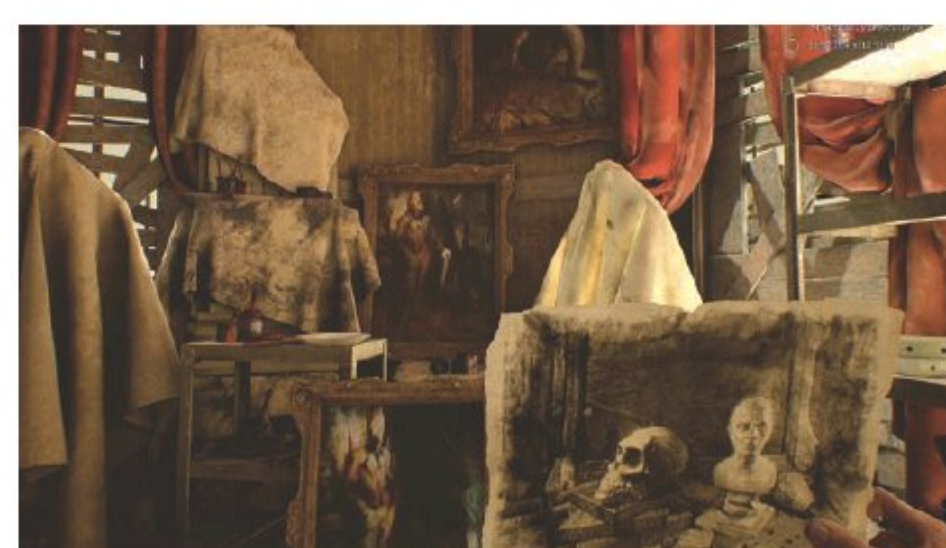
The weird thing is that, at the same time that *Call of Cthulhu* seems so over-eager to indulge in Lovecraftian tropes with its monsters, cultists and forbidden tomes, it also struggles to trust in them for its horror. There are key themes that make the Mythos uniquely scary – existential dread, fear of the unknown, the terror of losing your mind – but as if trying to hedge its bets, the game throws in a load of other horror ideas too.

As I crept around a hospital run by a mad scientist, discovering piles of body parts and gore in every other room, I couldn't help but feel the game had lost the thread of what could have made it unsettling. A disembodied torso doesn't make me think about my insignificance in an uncaring universe – it just makes me think, “Ew, gross.” But, it has to be said, subtlety and focus are not generally the strong suits of big-budget videogame storytelling. My search for another great Lovecraftian detective game continues. ■

THE MYTHOS IS ALWAYS MOST EFFECTIVE IN GAMES WHEN IT'S USED WITH RESTRAINT



The face of a man who has seen too much.



LEFT: One of the game's more effective motifs is a series of surreal paintings.





“I would have dedicated my life to it in 1998, but now?”

“The Future is Greedy” but the past isn’t that generous, in **HARDWAR**

H MV. 1998. My birthday. A credit card. Whatever I bought was **THE** entertainment for the next six months. I had a major *Elite* itch that needed scratching. I’d done *Frontier* to death – literally, as my Atari ST died playing it – and I couldn’t get *First Encounters* to load up, as it had shipped broken.

It’s easy to forget that sometimes you bought a PC game that just didn’t work. No day-one patches, no online support. Most shops pointed to the specs and blamed you. Sometimes they were right. You just had to chance it. Promising space combat and trading, *Hardwar* looked amazing. The box artwork was created by The Designers Republic. There was a touch of cyberpunk, a dollop of Japanese neon anime culture and some futuristic Cyrillic type. It hit all my buttons.

I bought it, as it promised to boot right out of Windows 95 and... I couldn’t get it working. I got a ponderous pixelated slideshow for

MATT KILLEEN



THIS MONTH
Mourned the loss of box art but not DOS box.

ALSO PLAYED
Destroyer: The U-Boat Hunter,
It Takes Two

the few seconds before it crashed, but my lumbering Compaq PC couldn’t make sense of it.

The Software Refinery went bust. The game vanished into a decades-long legal no-mans-land. Original developer Ian Martin provided unofficial patches for the zealous community, who insisted it was a lost gem, but I never got around to jumping the hoops required to play it on modern machines. I kept the box though. It went with me on every move. A museum piece. An artwork.

THE GAME VANISHED INTO A DECADES-LONG LEGAL NO-MANS-LAND

BACK TO LIFE

Then, 25 years later, *Hardwar* appeared on Steam. There would be a beautiful symmetry to this piece if the game didn’t work. But it does.

There’s the promised pumping electronica. It turns off, but not down. For a game from the brown era, it’s also twinkly, your navigation lights pulsing with the music.

I die. A lot. And when you’re killed, you’re ejected from the game and land back in Steam. After three hours I complete the first mission without being destroyed by an enemy I can’t even find, and I net a total of \$12, about 0.1% of my starting cash. Even taking the Aggressor or Agitator ships from the off, the grind is long. I would have dedicated my life to it in 1998, but now?

The irony is, I’m the one who is broken. I’m as old and janky as the game’s FMV, a cyberpunk past his use-by date. After decades of tutorials, mild learning curves, the gentle trucking in *Elite: Dangerous* and the hand holding of *Squadrons*, I am simply not capable of hardcoring, ’90s style. Or indeed, *Hardwaring*. ■



MASTER THE FORCE IN

STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

Kestis knows bestest. *By Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Normal

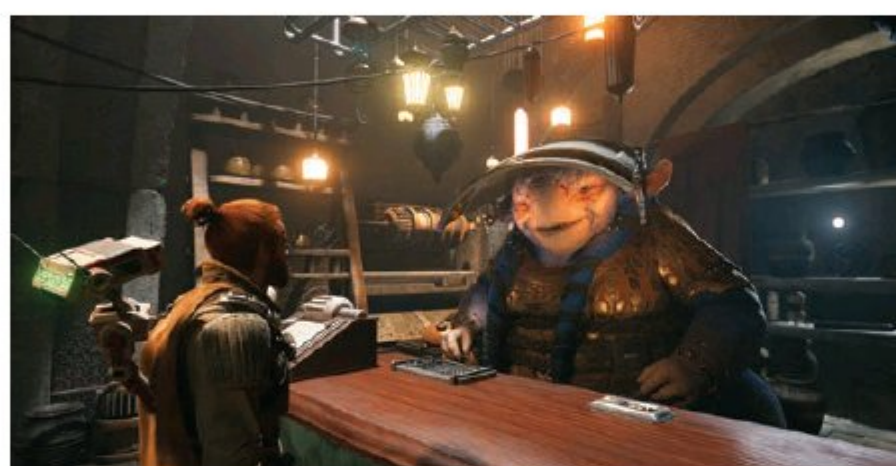
TIME
20 hours

VITAL LINKS

Health Stim locations:
bit.ly/3VqRiw7

Priorite Shard locations
bit.ly/3oUUtZP

Outfit locations:
bit.ly/3LKHN7E



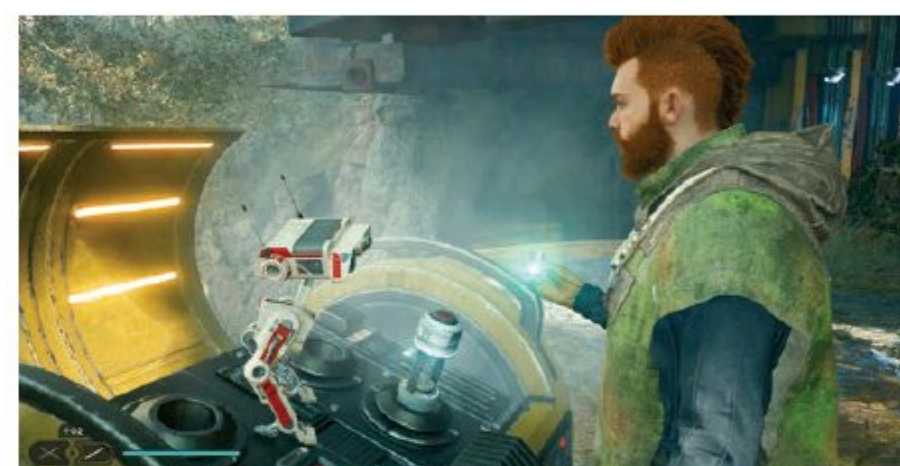
FIRST PRIORITE

1 You can find these sparkly Priorite Shards on Coruscant and across Koboh, but once you rescue Zee the droid during the main story, you'll be able to spend them at Doma's shop in exchange for snazzy new Jedi outfits, weapon styles and even a health stim.



ESSENTIALLY

2 If you're finding all of the perils of Koboh too much to contend with, search out and meditate at essence points. These handy little nodes of blue light provide extra health and force points, and can give you new ability points to spend, or perks to equip.



HEALTH STIMS

3 BD-1 only carries so many health vials for Cal, but you can get more by finding stim consoles. These are pretty rare, but there's one to grab in the Basalt Forest on Koboh early on, and when you take shelter from the sandstorm once you first arrive on Jedha.



SECRET BOSSES

4 From Rambler's Reach meditation, head left up the vines to find the mineshaft entrance to the Sudden Grotto – the dungeon lair of a deadly Rancor. You can also fight the Spawn of Oggdo boss in Fort Kah'lin to earn Cal's iconic poncho, though don't let its tongue grab you.



HOLD MY BEARD

5 Outfits aren't Cal's only customisable element; you can tweak his face-based fashion, too. There are beards to unearth all across Koboh, but you can buy quite the selection from Doma's shop in Rambler's Reach.



DATADISCS

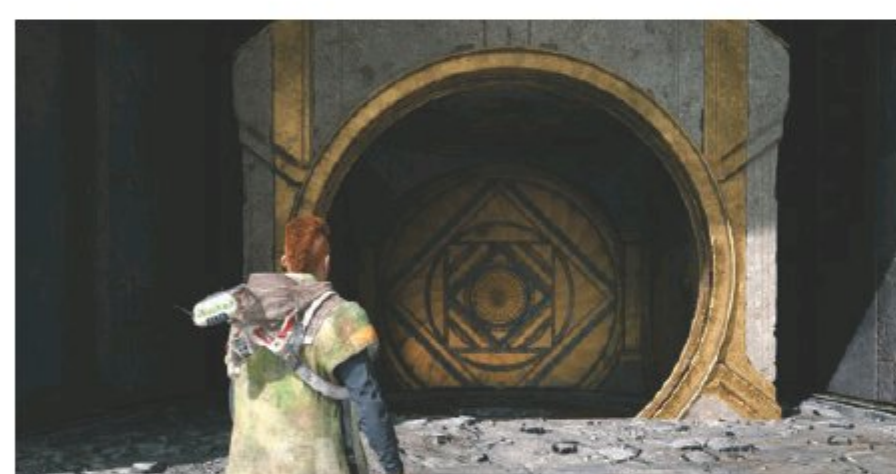
6 They may twinkle like Priorite, but Datadiscs serve a different purpose. You can find these artefacts in ruins like the Forest Array and Shattered Moon, and trade them for perks once you return to find the fixed-up Mantis in Rambler's Reach.



LIGHTSABERS

7 Beside stances, Cal can customise his entire lightsaber with parts found in the world. Some of the prettiest pieces are hidden in High Republic Meditation Chambers, but once you head to Jedha, you can also use Jedha Scrolls you find to purchase new parts.

HOLO TACTICS *Killer strats to crush your opponents*



MEDITATION CHAMBERS

8 These puzzle rooms are your best way to get guaranteed perks, though they often contain a Datadisc, too. The first is in the Basalt Forest when travelling to the Forest Array, and there's another in the Untamed Downs you can access with the nekkō mount's high jump.



BLAST 'EM

9 While deflecting shots with two twirling lightsabers is fun, the best stance gives Cal his very own blaster. Killing enemies with the saber reloads the gun, letting you take a few charged pot shots mid combo. You get the blaster from Bode after you first head to Jedha.



BOUNTY HUNTER

10 After the Koboh: Research Tanalorr mission, you'll meet the bounty hunter, Korej Lim, and unlock your very own targets to hunt down. Defeating these mini-bosses gives you pucks to spend on different blaster styles and charged shot abilities.



SCOOVA STEV

11 Once you unlock the fish tank on the first floor of Pyloon's Saloon, you can start your very own aquarium. Find Scoova Stev on his boat in the Foothill Falls, and then talk to him at different watering holes across Koboh to catch more fish for your collection.



TEAR IT UP

12 If you encounter one of these strange glowing rifts, you've found a Force Tear. These challenges, ranging from defeating two Rancors to killing 150 droids, should not be taken lightly. You will get an ability point for every one you complete.

IT'S ALL OVER...

STAR THE BEARDS STRIKE BACK WARS

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...

Cal Kestis, Jedi, expresses himself through a series of beards, including...



QUI-GON CHIN STRIP

A high-maintenance beard worn by Cal mostly while dueling and chopping down trees.



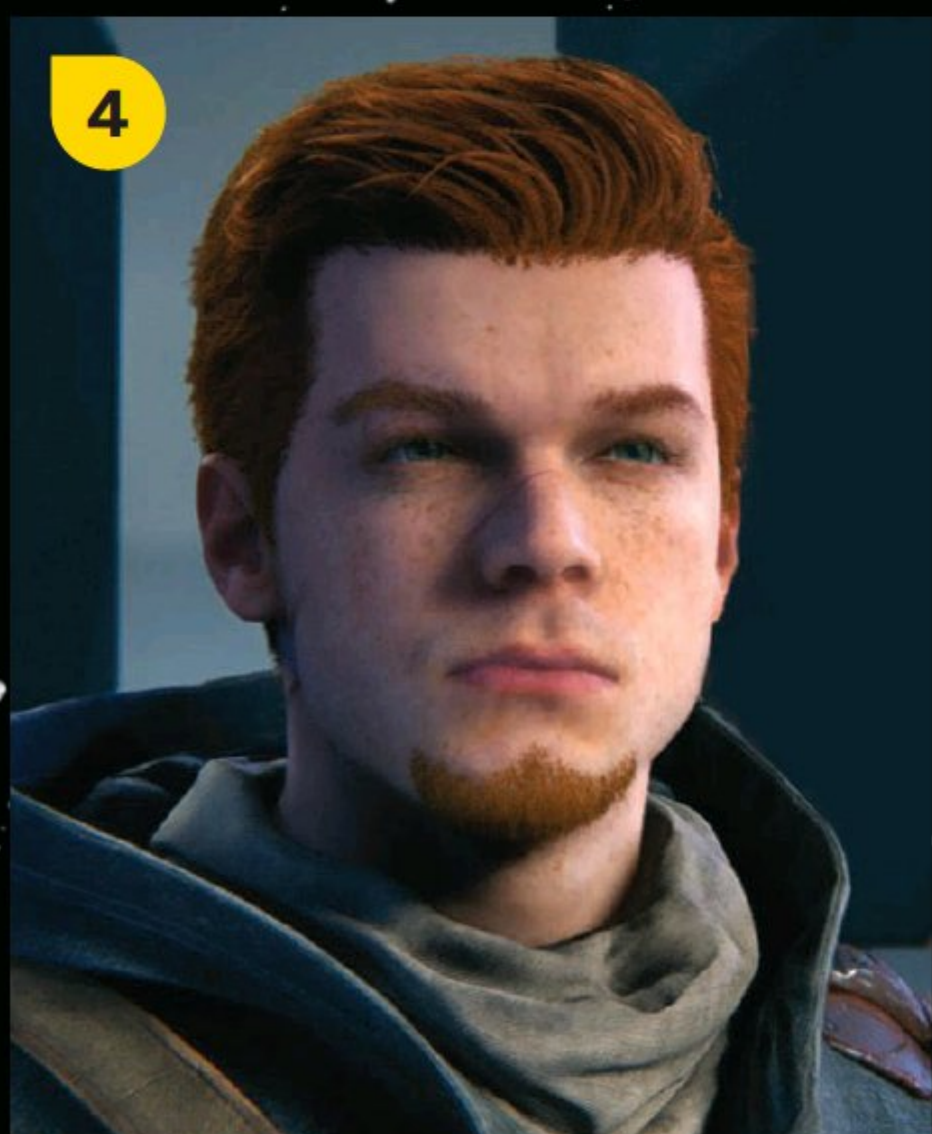
OBI-WAN GOATEE

While undercover in Empire-controlled coffee shops, Cal blends in by going full hipster.



DARTH MOUSTACHE

Cal got dumped regularly for some reason when cultivating this look. That is why you fail.



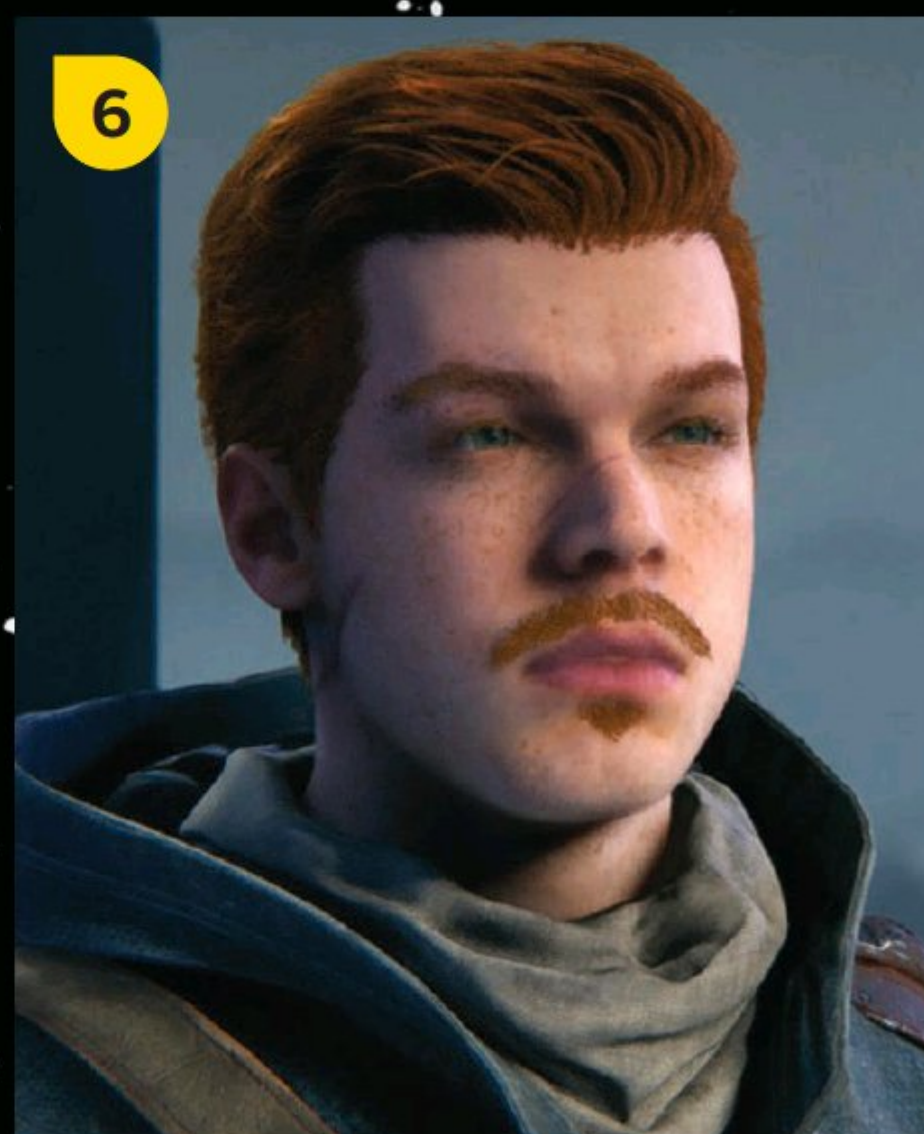
COUNT DUCKTAIL

Cal's aristo look when infiltrating meetings of corrupted nobles from galactic high society.



EMPEROR PENCILTINE

Facial hair infused with dark Force energy allows Cal to look a bad boy while on the pull.



BEN SOUL-O PATCH

While wrestling with his daddy issues, Cal decides to show his isolation in beard form.

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